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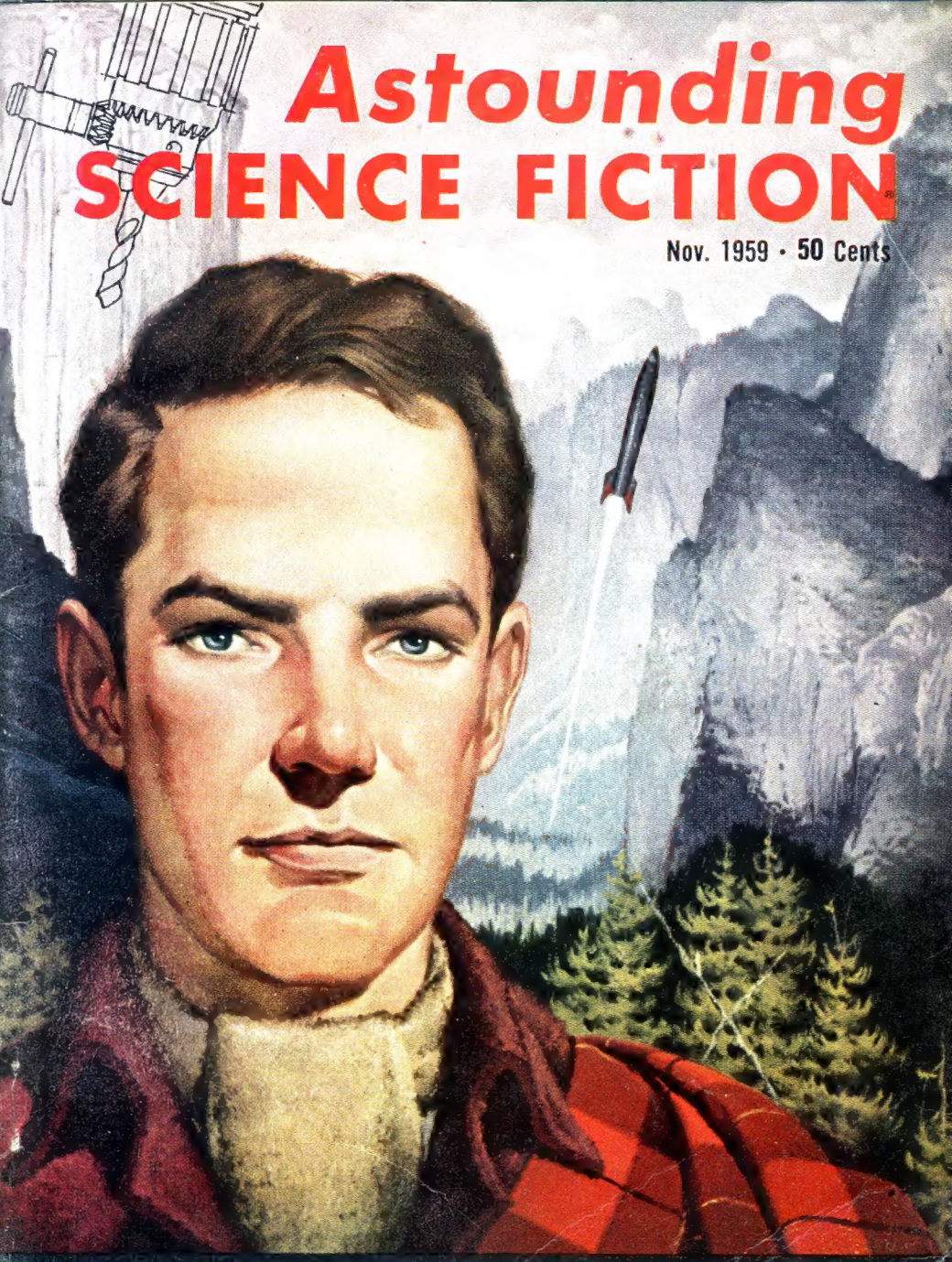

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COVER BY VAN DONGEN

*SYMBOL: Removal recommended (!) before operating machine.*

*Illustrations by Bernklau, Freas Martinez and van Dongen*

## NOVEMBER 1959

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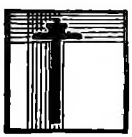
He was right—dead right—as he sped along,
But he's just as dead as if he'd been dead wrong.
Traffic Safety Rhyme.



THE United States and the Western Nations are, today, standing firm and staunch behind the mighty bulwark of their Righteousness, their Good Intentions, and their sincere and honest wish for the benefit of humanity.

France stood firm behind the Maginot Line, too.

Old proverbs and wishful saws to the contrary notwithstanding—Right does *not* make Might. Right does *not* automatically assure victory. Having the right of way may assure that the other guy is held liable to pay your widow and children . . . but even that doesn't assure that he has anything to do it with.

And not infrequently those who stand staunch and firm by the Right they believe in turn out to have been on the wrong side anyway.

When Herr Hitler wrote out in detail his intended plan of campaign, nobody believed him. His intentions were Wrong, and therefore since Right conquers Wrong, he couldn't possibly . . .

Well, of course it's true that, in the long run, he didn't. But look . . . let's not have such a long run as that again, huh? That one was a kind of narrow squeak for a while—

The publicly expressed intention of Communism has been stated with equally exact, specific blueprints. To

conquer the world by any means possible—politically, economically, or by military force if necessary.

Now one way to lose a war is to stand firm behind your bastions . . . while the opponent comes around left field, leaving you solidly entrenched in your bastions, but with your country overrun. The French found out about that one, in 1940. If you defend solidly on the front that isn't being attacked, you may wind up feeling peculiarly helpless and stupid.

The Communist dogma is not, and never has been, primarily a military threat. Communists are not stupid—anti-communist propaganda to the contrary notwithstanding—and military ventures are always risky, costly, and delay achievement of more practical goals. Military means are to be employed *only if necessary.*

The major attacks, the primary efforts, are directed toward political and economic action. Hitler was a fool; he thought in terms of military action as the short, quick way to success. The Communists are many things—but they are not fools.

Let's try analyzing in somewhat less propagandistic terms what we're up against now.

The United States has, on two occasions, undertaken major military action to "make the world safe for Democracy." Before going too far out on the limb of self-righteousness in railing against Communists who are seeking to make other peoples accept their way of life—let us have the grace to recognize that that's precisely what we're trying to do.

"Bet Democracy is good for everybody! Everybody wants Freedom and a right to choose his own way of life!"

That noble sentiment happens to be provably false. When Peter the Great of Russia tried to start Russia toward industrialization some centuries ago—when the rest of Europe was industrializing—he issued an imperial edict freeing the serfs. He was forced to rescind it, because the *serfs* rebelled against the imposition of freedom!

When Ethiopia sought to join the old League of Nations, after World War I, the country still had slavery as an institution; membership in the League required that slavery be outlawed. Ethiopia passed laws freeing the slaves . . . and immediately had a slave rebellion. They had to rescind the edict, modifying it so that a slave could be freed only with the slave's consent.

Nearer home—and screams of outrage will not be accepted unless you bring solid documentary evidence to support the protest—during the years of the Civil War, the Negro slaves in our South did not rebel. And it was not because they were being cruelly suppressed, either; the hypothetical suppressors were all away from home busily fighting off the Northern invaders. What *you* feel about the matter is not necessarily what the other fellow actually felt.

Be it noted: I'm *not* saying that

the slaves were right and wise and sensible to want to be slaves; I'm not saying that the masters were right and wise and sensible to keep them slaves.

I'm making a very simple assertion: History strongly indicates that some populations of human beings want to be slaves. This may be equivalent to saying that drug addicts want to be slaves to their drug—I'm not propounding a moral issue here, but calling attention to a simple historically demonstrable fact. It is *not* true that *all* human beings want freedom.

Also, it is *not* true that Democracy is good for everybody. It is not good for small children to be made free to choose their own way of life; the generalization is that people who do not have adequate experience and education to choose wisely cannot be benefitted by forcing them to choose their own way of life.

That Communism has horrible aspects we are readily able to see; that American Democracy, thrust on an unprepared people, could be equally horrible is, naturally, harder for us to appreciate. (Though our own little experience with the shambles of the Reconstruction Days in the south, after the Civil War, might suggest that the change over to what we now mean by Democracy isn't quite the lovely dawning of a beautiful new day we tend to think it automatically must be.)

The United States, as a technical-industrial-military power is well able to meet any military threat. We couldn't fight a modern full-scale war without horrible wounds that would, actually, destroy us as a nation—but, in the fight, we would most certainly destroy the national integrity of any nation attacking us.

But . . . are we perhaps defending powerfully the front that isn't, actually, under attack? Are we defending against the threat that is a feint more than an attack?

The simple fact is that Democracy is just as alien to most of the non-western nations as is Communism. Fundamentally, the backward nations of the world want neither one; they want precisely what we say they have a right to—to choose their own way of life. And that means to go on just exactly the way they have been. What did Ghandi want for India? The freedom to go back to their old, classical way of life without interference from British, Japanese, or Communist. Will we, of the United States, permit the continuity of a way of life thousands of years old . . .?

And, for that matter, should we, actually?

Of course, as of now, we haven't the choice; the Communist intention is to change those ancient ways of life. Because of that, it becomes a question of whether the culture under pressure changes to a Communist, or to the American-Western-Democracy form, because it sure-for-certain isn't going to be allowed to stay as it is.

There are two fronts other than the military, then; the Political-So-

ciological and the Economic. On the economic front, Russia is doing a tremendous job of work; they're overtaking, and at an increasing pace, the accomplishments of the United States. Economically, Russia has some fundamental advantages over the United States; they can support a larger population, because of the greater land area, and they are, just now, beginning to exploit their great natural resources. The immense iron deposits of the Lake Superior district, on which our steel industry was founded, are approaching exhaustion; our supplies of coal and oil are decreasing. Russia is only beginning. China, too, is getting into the act; China's resources are equally untapped.

The economic problem will become increasingly acute—but the immediate problem is political-sociological.

And in this area, *the United States is almost defenseless!* The reason for saying that is this: we have achieved a high-level industrial culture, with all that implies in terms of social, economic, and biological-health benefits. But—*we don't know how we did it!*

Let's state the problem in a stark, simple manner. Let's say that Sam and Ivan are culture-salesmen, trying to sell their cultural product to U Chon, a southeast Asian native of a thousands-of-years-old feudalistic culture.

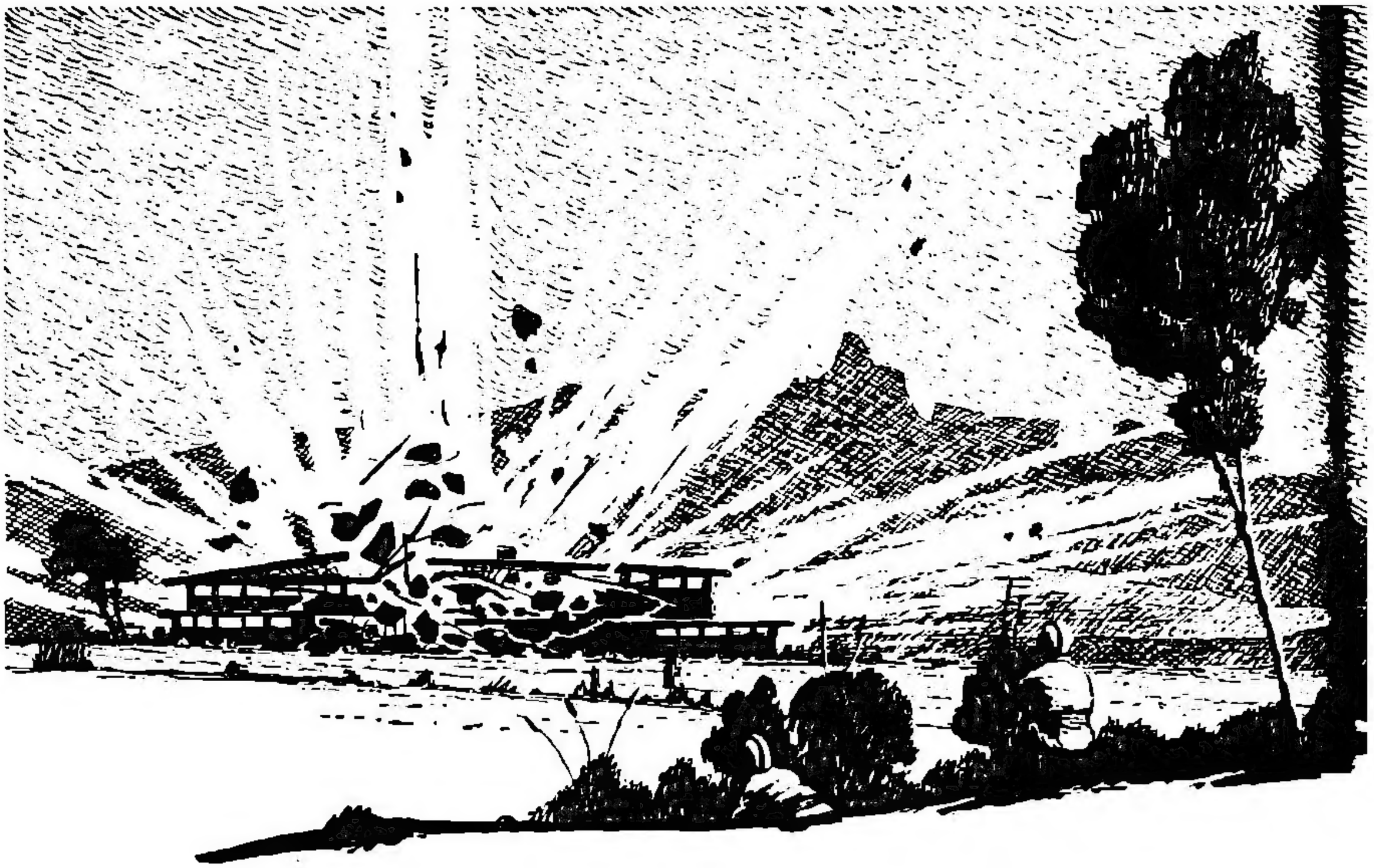
Sam says, "My culture-machine is the finest in the world. It's bigger, shinier, more comfortable, and slicker than any other."

"Yes," says Ivan, "it's a fine one. But, U Chon, it takes one hundred fifty years to go from where you are to where Sam is, using Sam's methods. *If,* that is, Sam could tell you what his methods were—which he won't. I'll tell you what his method was, though; Sam looked around for a great area of rich natural resources, went in and killed off the native inhabitants who weren't using those resources, and moved in a new population that would and could use them. That's Sam's method—and you can see how much good that'll do *you.* You're the native population! And even so, Sam's method is so inefficient it took him one hundred fifty years to achieve industrialism!

"But look here; we have complete, exact blue-print plans for you. And the plans *work;* they take only forty years, and we can prove it! Only forty years ago, we Russians were serfs in an ancient feudalism. Now we're citizens of a great industrial nation! And *our* method does not require killing off the native population and importing a new one!"

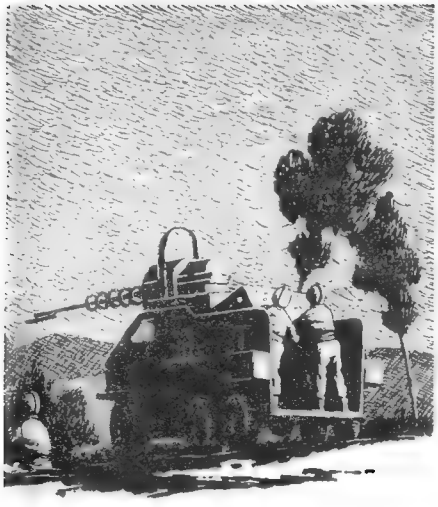
So Ivan's statement is somewhat unfair! When did a salesman fail to take advantage of the flaws of his competitor's position? What Ivan says is true; we *did* move in, kill off the native population, and move in a population of our own. It's there in history. And Ivan's right, also, in saying that his Communist method doesn't do that; they *did* take the native population, and raise their

(*Continued on page* 157)



Illustrated by van Dongen

# THE BEST MADE PLANS



***First of Two Parts.*** ***There are some people that it is extremely unwise to cross . . . and the fireworks start when two such people cross each other!***

# BY EVERETT B. COLE

DON MICHAELS twisted about uneasily for a moment, then looked toward the doors of the darkened auditorium. He shook his head, then returned his attention to the stage. Of course, he'd joined in the applause—a guy felt sort of idiotic, just sitting there while everyone else in the place made loud noises—but that comedy act had been pretty smelly. They should have groaned instead of applauding.

Oh, sure, he thought, the drama students had to have experience on the stage. And they really needed an audience—if they were going to have any realism in their performances. Sure, that part of it was all right, but why did the professionals have to join the party? Why did they have to have 'casts like that last thing—especially at a school Aud Call? It seemed anything but educational, and he'd had to skip a good class for this one. He shrugged. Of course, everyone else had skipped one class or another, he knew. So why should he be an exception? Too, some of the students would welcome and applaud anything

that gave them a break from their studies. And the schedule probably took account of this sort of thing anyway. But . . .

A fanfare interrupted his thoughts. From the backstage speakers came the smooth rhythm of a band playing a march trio. He sat back.

The screen glowed and became a large rectangle of blue, dotted with fleecy clouds. In the distance, the towers of Oreladar poked up from a carpet of green trees.

Swiftly, the camera approached the city, to center for a moment on a large sports stadium. Players dashed across the turf, then the camera swung away. Briefly, it paused to record various city scenes, then it crossed the walls of the Palace and came to ground level on the parade grounds of the Royal Guards.

A review was underway. For a few seconds, the camera held on the massed troops, then it centered on the reviewing stand. The band modulated smoothly into a brilliant quickstep and a column of guards marched to center screen, the colors of their dress uniforms contrasting with the green of the perfectly kept field.

Now, the field of view narrowed, centering the view first on the color guard, then on the colors alone. The camera moved down till the gold and blue of Oredan's royal colors stood out against the blue sky.

The band music faded, to be overridden then replaced by a smooth baritone voice.

"This is your news reporter," it said, "Merle Boyce, bringing you the latest happenings of the day."

The colors receded, their background blurring then coming into focus again. Now, they stood before a large window. Again, the camera receded and a man appeared in the foreground. For a moment he sat at his plain desk, gazing directly out of the screen and seeming to look searchingly into Don's face. Then he smiled engagingly and nodded.

"As every citizen of Oredan knows," he said, "this nation has been swept by a wave of terrorism during the few days past. Indeed, the now notorious Waern affair became so serious that our Prime Minister found it necessary to take personal command of the Enforcement Corps and direct the search for the terrorists himself. Now, he is present, to bring to you, the people, his report of the conclusion of this terrible affair." He paused, drawing a breath.

"Citizen of Oredan," he declaimed slowly, "the Prime Minister, Daniel Stern, Prince Regent."

He faced away from the camera and faded from view. Again, the gold and blue of Oredan filled the screen.

There was a brief blare of trumpets. Then drums rolled and the heavy banner swept aside to reveal a tall, slender man, who approached the camera deliberately. He glanced aside for a moment, then pinned his audience with an intense stare.

"This has been a terrible experience for many of our people," he began. "And it has been a harrowing time for your public officials. One

of our own—a one-time police commissioner—a man sworn to uphold law and order, has suddenly revealed himself as a prime enemy of the realm and of our people. This in itself is a bad thing. But this was not enough for Harle Waern." He held out a hand, his face growing stern.

"No, Waern was unwilling to abide by the results of a lawful trial. knowing the outcome of any full investigation into his activities, he chose to lash out further at authority and to burn his way out of detention. He killed some of his guards. He released other criminals. He formed them into a gang, enlisting their aid in cutting and burning his way across our land in an obvious effort to reach the hills and possibly stir some of the mountain clans to rebellion. And as he went, he left destruction and death." He nodded his head sadly.

"Yes, it is painful to report, but it must be admitted that no less than twenty innocent people have lost their lives as a result of Waern's actions. And many more have been injured or have suffered property loss. It has been a savage affair—one we'll be long in forgetting. And it is with considerable relief that we can report its final conclusion." He stepped back, then faded from view.

The screen brightened again to show a rambling white house which nestled in a grove of shade trees. Behind it, rose a small hill which acted as a mere step toward the peaks of high mountains beyond. Before it was a broad lawn, dotted with lounging furniture. Reflected in its windows was the glow of the rising sun, which flood-lit the entire scene. From the speakers came muted sounds. An insect chirped. Hurrying footsteps crunched on gravel. There were soft rattles and bangs, and somewhere a motor rumbled briefly, then coughed to silence.

"We are now," said a voice, "a few miles outside of the city of Riandar, where Harle Waern had this summer estate built for him."

As the announcer spoke, the camera moved about to pick out details of the estate. It showed a swimming pool back of the house. It swung briefly about landscaped gardens, scanning across cultivated fields and orchards. It flicked across a winding, tree-lined road, then came back to a rough area before the smooth lawn.

Partially concealed from the house by waving grass and field weeds, men were moving cautiously about the fields. Near a small hummock, a loudspeaker rose from its stand, to face the house. A man lay not too far from the base of the stand. Microphone in hand, he looked intently through the grass, to study the windows of the house. Then he glanced back to note the positions of the others.

The camera's viewpoint raised, to take in the entire scene beyond the field. The sky blurred, then seemed to open, to show Daniel Stern's long, thin face. He cast his eyes down for a moment, seeming to take in the details of the scene, then stared

straight at the audience, his deep-set eyes glowing hypnotically.

"Here then," he said slowly, "is one of the properties which Harle Waern bought while acting as Police Commissioner of Riandar. Here is a mere sample of the gains he enjoyed for a time as the price of his defections from his oath of office. And here is the stage he chose for the final act, his last struggle against the nation he had betrayed."

His face faded from view, the deep-set eyes shining from the sky for a time after the rest of the face had faded from view.

Then the camera swung again, to show a low-slung weapons carrier which had pulled up a few dozen meters back of the man with the microphone. About it, the air shimmered a little, as though a filmy screen lay between vehicle and camera. It softened the harsh lines of the carrier and its weapon, lending them an almost mystical appearance.

The crew chief was clearly visible, however. He was making adjustments on one of the instruments on the projector mount. One of the crew members stood by on the charge rack, busying himself with adjustments on the charge activators. None of the crew looked toward the camera.

The loud-speaker clicked and rasped into life.

"Harle Waern, this is the Enforcement Corps. We know you are in there. You were seen to go into that house with your friends. You have one minute to throw out your weapons and come out with your hands in the air. This is your last chance."

There was another click from the loud-speaker. Then the scene was quiet.

Someone cleared his throat. The man with the microphone shifted his position and lay stretched out. He had sought cover behind the hummock near the speaker stand and now he raised his head cautiously, to watch the silent windows of the house. Other men lay in similar positions, their attention on the windows, their weapons ready. The windows stared blankly back.

The camera shifted back to the weapons carrier. A low voice spoke.

"Let's have a look at that scope, Walton."

A man's back moved aside and the light and dark pattern of the range detector showed on the screen. The low voice spoke again.

"Four of them," it said. "Looks as though they've got a small arsenal in there with 'em. See those bright pips?"

"Khroal?" queried another voice.

"A couple of those, yeah," the first voice said. "But that isn't too bad. Those are just antipersonnel. They've got a pair of rippers, too. Good thing we've got screens up. And there's a firebug. They could give those guys on the ground a real hard time." A finger appeared in front of the detector.

"See that haze with the lines in it?"

"Them the charges?"

"That's right. They show up like

that on both scopes, see? You can always spot heat-ray charges. They look like nothing else. Only trouble is, they louse up the range scale. You can't tell—"

Don looked critically at the carrier. There was, he thought, evidence of carelessness. No deflector screens were set up. A Moreku tribesman could put a stone from a sling in there, and really mess them up—if he could sneak in close enough. He grinned inwardly.

"Of course, if he hit the right spot, he'd go up with 'em," he told himself. "Be quite a blast."

He continued to study the weapons carrier arrangements, noting that the chargers were hot, ready for instant activation. Even the gun current was on. He could see the faint iridescence around the beam-forming elements. He shook his head.

"Hit that lens system against something right now," he muttered inaudibly, "or get something in the field, and that would be the end."

The loud-speaker clicked again and the camera swung to center the house in its field of view.

"Your time is running out, Waern." The amplified roar of the voice reverberated from the hills. "You have twenty seconds left."

Abruptly, the speaker became a blaze of almost intolerable light. The man near it rolled away hurriedly, dropping his microphone. Another man quickly picked up a handset and spoke briefly into it.

Again, the camera picked up the weapons carrier. The crew chief had his hand on his microphone switch. He nodded curtly and adjusted a dial. The lens barrel of the projector swung toward the house, stopped, swung back a trifle, and held steady.

The pointer, sitting in front of the crew chief, moved a hand and flicked a switch.

"Locked on."

The crew chief glanced over the man's shoulder, reached out to put his hand on a polished lever, and pressed. Mechanism at the rear of the long projector clicked. The faint glow over the beam formers became a blaze. A charge case dropped out and rolled into a chute. Another charge slid in to replace it and for a brief instant, a coruscating stream of almost solid light formed a bridge between house and carrier.

Then the busy click of mechanism was drowned by the crash of an explosion. A ragged mass of flame shot from the house, boiled skyward, then darkened, to be replaced by a confused blur of smoke and flying debris. The crew chief took his hand from the lever and waited.

At last, the drumroll of echoes faded to silence—the debris fell back to ground—the smoke drifted down the valley with the light breeze. And the rising sun again flooded its light over the estate.

The rambling white house, shaded by its miniature grove of trees, had gone. Charred timbers reached toward the sky from a blackened scar in the grass. On the carefully kept lawn, little red flowers bloomed, their

black beds expanding as the flaming blossoms grew.

Near the charred skeleton of the house, one tree remained stubbornly upright, its bare branches hanging brokenly. About it, bright flames danced on the shattered bits of its companions.

In the fields about the house, men were getting to their feet, to stretch cramped muscles and exercise chilled limbs. A few of them started toward the ruins and the man by the speaker got to his feet to wave them back.

"Too hot to approach yet," he shouted. "We'll let a clean-up crew go over it later."

The scene faded. For an instant, the royal colors of Oredan filled the screen, then the banner folded back and Daniel Stern faced his audience, his gaze seeming to search the thoughts of those before him.

"And so," he said, "Harle Waern came to bay and elected to shoot it out with the Enforcement Corps." He moved his head from side to side.

"And with the armament he had gathered, he and his companions might even have succeeded in burning their way to the mountains, despite the cordon of officers surrounding their hide-out. He thought he could do that. But precautions had been taken. Reinforcements were called in. And such force as was needed was called into play." He sighed.

"So there's an end. An end to one case. An end to a false official, who thought he was too big for the law he had sworn to uphold." He held out a hand.

"But there still remain those who hired this man—those who paid him the price of those estates and those good things Waern enjoyed for a time. Your Enforcement Corps is searching for those men. And they will be found. Wherever they are—whoever they are—your Enforcement Corps will not rest so long as one of them remains at liberty." He stared penetratingly at the camera for a moment, then nodded and turned away.

The musical salute to the ruler sounded from the speakers as the scene faded. Once again, the green grass of the Royal Guard parade field came into view. As the color guard stood at attention, the band modulated into the "Song of the Talu."

Don Michaels got out of his seat. The Aud Call would be over in a few minutes, he knew, and he'd have to be at his post when the crowd streamed out. He moved back toward the doors, opened one a trifle, and slid through.

Some others had already come out into the hall. A few more slid out to join them, until a small group stood outside the auditorium. They examined each other casually, then scattered.

Unhurriedly, Don walked through the empty corridors, turning at a stairwell.

How, he wondered, did a man like Harle Waern get started on the wrong track? The man had been a

member of one of the oldest of the noble families — had always had plenty of money—plenty of prestige. What was it that made someone like that become a criminal?

"Should've known he'd get caught sooner or later," he told himself, "even if he had no honesty about him. I don't get it."

He got to the bottom of the stairs and walked into the boy's locker room.

Between a couple of rows of lockers, a youth sat in an inconspicuously placed chair. Don went up to him.

"Hi, Darrin," he said. "About ready to pack it up?"

The other gathered his books.

"Yeah. Guess so. Nothing going on down here. Wonder why they have us hanging around this place anyway?"

Don grinned. "Guess somebody broke into a locker once and they want a witness next time. Got to have something for us Guardians to do, don't they?"

"Suppose so. But when you get almost through with your pre-professional . . . hey, Michaels, how did you make out on the last exam? Looked to me as though Masterson threw us a few curves. Or did you get the same exam? Like that business about rehabilitation? It ain't in the book."

"Oh, that." Don shrugged. "He gave us the low-down on that during class last week. Suppose your group got the same lecture. You should've checked your notes."

Darrin shrugged and stood up. "Always somebody don't get the news," he grumbled. "This time, it's me. I was out for a few days. Oh, well. How was the Aud?"

Don spread his hands. "About like usual, I'd say. Oh, they had a run on the end of the Waern affair. Really fixed that bird for keeps. Otherwise?"

He waved his hands in a flapping motion.

The other grinned, then turned as a bell clanged.

There was a rumbling series of crashes, followed by a roar which echoed through the corridors. Darrin turned quickly.

"I'd better get going," he said, "before I get caught in the stampede. Should be able to sneak up the back stairs right now. See you later." He strode away.

Michaels nodded and sat down, opening a notebook.

Students commenced rushing into the locker room and the roar in the hall was almost drowned out by the continuous clash and slam of locker doors. Don paid little attention, concentrating on his notes.

At last, the noise died down and Don looked up. Except for one slender figure, crouched by an open locker, the room was empty.

Don looked at the boy curiously. He was a typical Khlorisana—olive skinned, slightly built, somewhat shorter than the average galactic. Don looked with a touch of envy at the smooth hairline, wondering why it was that the natives of this planet

always seemed to have a perfect growth of head fur which never needed the attention of a barber. He rubbed his own unruly hair, then shrugged.

"Hate to change places with Pete Waern now, though," he told himself. "Wonder where he stands in this business."

Hurrying footsteps sounded in the corridor and three latecomers rushed in. As Waern straightened to close his locker door, the leader of the group crashed into him.

"Hey," he demanded, "what's the idea trying to trip me?" He paused, looking at the boy closely. "Oh, you again! Still trying to be a big man, huh?" He placed a hand on Waern's chest, pushing violently.

"Out of your way, trash."

Pete Waern staggered back, dropping his books. A notebook landed on its back and sprang open, to scatter paper over the floor. He looked at the mess for an instant.

One of the three laughed.

"That's how you show 'em, Gerry."

Pete stared angrily at his attacker.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The three advanced purposefully. One seized Pete by an arm, swinging him about violently. Another joined him and between them, they held the smaller lad firmly.

Gerry swung an open hand jarringly against Pete's face.

"Guess you're going to have to have a little lesson in how to talk to your betters," he snarled. He drew back a fist.

Don Michaels had come out of his chair. He strode over to the group, to face the attacker.

"Just exactly what *do* you think you're doing?" he demanded icily.

"Who do you think you are?"

Don touched a small bronze button in his lapel. "I'm one of the guys that's supposed to keep order around this place," he said. "We've got self-government in this school, remember?" He swung about to confront the two who still held Waern.

"Now, suppose you turn this guy loose and start explaining yourselves."

Gerry placed a large hand on Don's shoulder, kneading at the muscles suggestively.

"Look, little man," he said patronizingly, "you'll be a lot better off if you just mind your own business. Like watching those lockers over there so they don't fly away or something. We'll take—"

Michaels swung around slowly, then put knuckles on hips and stared at the other sternly.

"Take that hand away," he said softly. "Now get over there, and start picking up those books. Get them nice and neat." His voice rose a trifle.

"Now, I said!" He stabbed a finger out.

The boy before him hesitated, his face contorted with effort. He forced a hand part way up.

Don continued to stare at him.

The other drew a sobbing breath,

then turned away and knelt by the scattered books and papers.

Don wheeled to confront the other two.

"Get over by those lockers," he ordered. "Now, let's hear it. What's your excuse for this row?"

"Aw, you saw it. You saw that little gersal trip Gerry there." The two had backed away, but now one of them started forward again.

"Come to think of it, you don't look so big to me." He half turned.

"Come on, Walt, let's—"

"Be quiet!" Michaels' gaze speared out at the speaker.

"Now, get over to those lockers. Move!" He swiveled his head to examine the boy who had picked up the books.

"Put them down there by the locker," he said coldly. "Then get yourself over there with your pals." He took a pad and pencil from his pocket, then pointed.

"All right. What's your name?"

"Walt . . . Walter Kelton."

"Class group?"

"Three oh one." The boy looked worried. "Hey, what you—"

"I'll tell you all about it—later." Don scribbled on the top sheet of the

pad, then tore it off. He pointed again.

"What's your name?"

"Aw, now, look. We—"

"Your name!"

"Aw . . . Gerald Kelton."

"Class group?"

"Aw, same as his. We're brothers."

"What's the number of your class group?"

"Aw . . . well, it's three oh one. Like I said—"

"Later! Now you. What's your name and class group?"

"Maurie Van Sickle. I'm in three oh one, too."

Don finished writing, then snapped three shots of paper toward the three.

"All right. Here are your copies of the report slips. You're charged with group assault. You'll report at the self-government office before noon tomorrow. Know where it is?"

"Yeah. Yeah, we know where it is, all right," grumbled Gerry Kelton. He pointed at Pete Waern.

"How about him?"

"Never mind about that. Just get your stuff and get to your classes. And you better make it fast. Late bell's about to ring. Now get going." Don turned toward Pete Waern.

"Close your locker, fella, and come over here."

He glanced at the three retreating backs, then turned and went back to his chair. Pete hesitated an instant, then picked up his books and locked the door of his locker. Again, he hesitated, and went slowly over to stand in front of Michaels.

Don looked at him curiously.

"You ever have any trouble with those three before now?"

Pete shook his head. "Not really," he said. "Oh, one of the Keltons . . . Gerry . . . sneaked off the grounds a few weeks ago. I wrote him up." He grinned.

"Pushed on past me when I was on noon guard. I trailed him to his class group later and got his name."

Don nodded. "He ever say anything to you about it?"

"No. I've seen him in the halls a few times since then. He always avoided me—up to now."

"I see." Don nodded. "But today, he suddenly went for you—with reinforcements."

Pete grinned wanly. "I guess I'll have to get used to things like that," he said. "Ever since Uncle Harle was—" He clasped his hands together, then turned suddenly aside.

For an instant, he stood, head averted, then he ran over to lean against a row of lockers, facing away from Michaels.

"Uncle Harle didn't— Oh, why don't you just leave me alone?"

Don considered him for a moment, then walked over, to place a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, hold up a minute, Chum," he said. "I'm not trying to give you a bad time. Now suppose you calm down a little. Doesn't do you a bit of good to tear yourself apart. You're not responsible for whatever your uncle got into, you know."

Pete faced him, his back braced against the lockers.

"That's what you say here," he said bitterly. "Sure, we've been in the same classes. You know me, so you try to be decent. But what do you really think? And how about everyone else? You think they're being all nice and understanding about this?" He snorted.

"Know why I'm not in class now? Got no class to go to. I was in Civics Four this period. They threw me out. Faculty advisor said I'd do better in . . . in some Shop Study."

Don frowned. "Funny," he said. "You always got good grades. No trouble that way?"

"Of course not." Pete spread his hands. "I—"

A low snicker interrupted the words and Don looked around, to see Gerry Kelton close by. Behind him were his brother and Maurie. Gerry laughed derisively.

"Go ahead," he commented, "let him talk. You might learn something from the little—"

Don motioned impatiently with his head.

"Get going, you three," he said sharply. "You've got less than a minute before late bell."

"Sure we have," Gerry told him. "We might even be late to class. Now wouldn't that be awful? Some jerk wants to write up a bunch of lousy report slips, make him look good, we're—"

"Move!" Michaels' voice rose sharply. "Don't try that one on me. It's been tried before. Doesn't work."

Gerry paused in mid-stride, then seemed to deflate. He turned away.

"Come on, guys," he said. "Let's get out of here. We'll take care of this later."

As the three disappeared down the hall, Don turned back. Pete was staring at him curiously.

"How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Oh, you know what I mean." Pete shook his head impatiently. "Make people do things. There's only one of you and three of them. And they're all bigger than you are. Why did they just do what you told them without making a lot of trouble?"

Don shrugged, then touched the button in his lapel.

"They were in the wrong and they knew it. They've got enough trouble now. Why should they look for more?"

Pete shook his head again. "They didn't have to give their names," he said. "All you did was tell them to."

"What else could they do? After all, you know who Gerry is. So he had no out."

Pete laughed wryly. "Who'd take my word? Besides, Gerry's shoved guardians around before. He's got friends all over school. Ever hear of the 'Hunters'?"

"Who hasn't? Supposed to be some sort of gang, but I've never talked to anyone that knew much about who they are, or what they do." Don was thoughtful. "Supposed to be all galactic kids. I've heard the police are try-

ing to break them up. Those three part of that bunch?"

Pete nodded wordlessly.

Don's eyebrows rose a little. "Prove that," he remarked, "and it won't just be the school that'll be giving them trouble. The police would probably give a lot to really get their hands on some of them."

"I'm not so sure about that," Pete told him. "It was my uncle who was interested in the Hunters. Now, it's different. Maybe the guy that went and got the proof of their membership would be the one who'd have the trouble. Real, final type trouble."

"What's that?"

"Look, I just told you. Among other things, my uncle was interested in the Hunters." Pete bent his knees and took a squatting position. His elbows rested on his knees and he relaxed, resting his chin on folded hands and looking up at Don.

"Seems as though some other people didn't like to have him asking too many questions around." He paused.

"You think my uncle was getting a lot of money from the gamblers and some smuggling combine. That right?"

"Well—" Don hesitated.

"Sure you do. So does everybody else. The galactics are telling each other about why don't they get somebody in authority besides some stupid Khlorisana. And the Khlorisanu talk about the old nobility—how they can't stop robbing the people. It all goes along with what the papers have been saying. There's been more, too, but those bribery charges are what they've really worked on. They keep telling you some of the same stuff on the newscasts. And everybody believes them. But it isn't true. My uncle was an honest policeman. They got him out of the way because he wouldn't deal with them—and maybe for . . ." He held out a hand.

"Figure it out. Why didn't they just give him a trial and put him into prison if he were guilty? Or, if they were going to have an execution, why not make it legal—over in Hikoran?" He paused, then waved the hand as Don started to speak.

"They didn't dare have a trial. It would be too public, and there was no real evidence. So they say he escaped. They say he slugged a guard—took his weapons. And he's supposed to have shot his way out of Khor Fortress, after releasing some other prisoners. They say he forced his way clear from Hikoran to the Doer valley." He laughed bitterly.

"Did you ever see Khor Fortress?

"And you should have seen my uncle. He was a little, old man. He'd stand less chance of beating up some guard and taking his weapons than I would have of knocking out all three of those fellows a few minutes ago." Again, he paused, looking at Don searchingly.

"I don't know why I'm telling you all this, unless maybe I better tell someone while I'm still around to talk," he added.

"Now wait." Don shook his head. "Aren't you making—"

"A great, big thing? No." Pete shook his head decidedly. "I've talked

to my uncle. I've heard my uncle and father talk about things. And . . . well, maybe I've gotten mixed up in things a little, too. Maybe I'm really mixed up in things, and maybe—" He stopped talking suddenly and got to his feet.

"No, my uncle didn't escape. That whole affair was staged, so they wouldn't have to bring him to trial. Too many things would have come out, and they could never make a really legal case. This way . . . this way, he can't talk. No one can defend him now, and no one will ask too many questions." He turned away.

"Oh, listen." Don was impatient. "That flight developed into a national affair. All kinds of witnesses. It was spread out all over the map. People got killed. Who could set up something like that and make it look genuine?"

Pete didn't look around.

"Look who got killed. A lot of old-line royalists," he said shortly. "And some of the Waernu. You think my uncle would kill his own clansmen?" He expelled an explosive breath.

"And there's one man who could set up something like that. He doesn't like the old royalists very well, either. And he hates the Waernu. Think it over." He walked quickly out of the room.

Don looked after him for a few seconds, then sat down and fixed an unseeing gaze on the far wall of the locker room.

"Gaah!" he told himself, "the kid really pulled the door open. Wonder why he picked me?"

Come to think of it, he wondered, why was it people seemed to tell him things they never mentioned to anyone else? And why was it they seemed to get a sort of paralysis when he barked at them? He scratched an ear. He couldn't remember the time when the ranch hands hadn't jumped to do what he wanted—if he really wanted it. The only person who seemed to be immune was Dad. He grinned.

"Imagine anyone trying to get the the Old Man into a dither—and getting away with it."

He laughed and looked at the wall for a few more seconds, then opened a book.

"Wonder," he said to himself. "Seems as though anyone should be able to do it—if they were sure they were right." Then he shook his head. "Only one trouble with that idea," he added. "They don't." He shrugged and turned his attention to the book in his hands.

The click of heels on the flooring finally caused him to look up. He examined the new arrival, then smiled.

"Oh, hello, Jack."

"Hi, Don." The other looked at the array of books. "You look busy enough. Catching up on your skullwork?"

"Yeah. Guy has to study once in a while, just to pass the time away. Besides, this way, the prof doesn't have to spend so much money on red pencils."

"Yeah, sure." Jack Bordelle grinned. "Be terrible if he went broke buying red leads. I go to a lot of trouble myself to keep that from happening." He paused, looked sideways at Don, then rubbed his cheek.

"Speaking of trouble, I hear you had a little scrape here at the beginning of the period."

"That right? Where'd you get that word?"

"Seems as though Gerry Kelton didn't make it to class in time. Teacher ran him out for a late slip and he got me to write him up. He's pretty sore."

Don frowned. "Funny he'd need a late slip. He already had a write-up." He shrugged. "Oh, well. I should get excited about making some of the lower school crowd sore?"

Bordelle lifted one shoulder. "Well, Michaels, you know your own business, I guess, but Kelton's got a lot of friends around, they tell me."

"Yeah. I've heard." Don looked steadily at the other.

"And, well—" Bordelle examined the toes of his shoes carefully. "Well, maybe you ought to think it over about turning in those slips you wrote up, huh?"

"Think so?"

"Well, I would." Bordelle looked up, then down again. "You know, I've known a few guys, crossed the Keltons. Right away, they found themselves all tangled up with the Hunters. Makes things a little rugged, you know?"

"A little rugged, huh?"

"Yeah." Bordelle spread his hands. "Look, Michaels, I've got nothing in this one. It's just . . . well, I've known you for a few years now—ever since Lower School. Been in some classes with you. And you seem like a pretty decent, sensible guy. Hate to see you walk into a jam, see? Especially over some native kid with a stinking family record." He paused.

"Of course, it's your own business, but if it were me, I'd tear up those slips, you know?"

"Easy to tear up slips. Only one trouble. They're numbered. How would you explain the missing numbers?"

"Well, guys lose books now and then, remember? Maybe they wouldn't holler too loud."

Don smiled. "I knew a guy once that lost a book. They took it pretty hard. Got real rough about it."

Bordelle shrugged. "Yeah. But maybe Al Wells might not be so rough about it this time, huh? He might just sort of forget it, if you told him you just sort of . . . well, maybe you were checking the incinerator on your way to the office, and the book slipped out of your pocket —you know?"

"You think it could happen that way?"

"It could—easy."

Don stood up.

"Tell you," he said, "I might lose a book some day. But they don't come big enough to make me throw one away." He picked up his books and put them under his arm.

"I'm going to turn those slips in tonight. Maybe you'd better turn in

the one you wrote up, too. Then nobody'll get burned for losing a book."

"I always thought you were a pretty sensible guy, Michaels." Bordelle shook his head. "After all, you stopped that beef. Nobody got hurt, and you've got nothing to prove about yourself. Know what I mean? So why the big, high nose all at once?"

A bell clanged and the crash and roar of students dashing about echoed through the halls. Don shrugged carelessly.

"Oh, I don't know. Can't even explain it to myself. Maybe I just don't like people pushing other people around. Maybe I don't like to be threatened. Maybe I've even got bit by some of those principles Masterson's always talking about. I don't know." He turned away.

"Well, this is the end of my school day. See you."

Bordelle looked after him.

"Yeah," he said softly. "It's the end of your day all right. Better look out it doesn't turn out to be the end of all your days."

Don glanced down at his textbook, then looked out the window. A blanket of dark clouds obscured the sky. Light rain filtered coldly down, to diffuse the greenery of the school grounds, turning the scene outside into a textured pattern of greens, dotted here and there with a reddish blur. To the west, the mist completely hid the distant mountains.

It would be cold outside—probably down around sixteen degrees or so. It had dropped to fifteen this morning, and unless the weather cleared up, there'd be no point in going up to the hills this weekend. The Korental and his clan would be huddled in their huts, waiting for warmer weather. A wild Ghar hunt would be the last thing they'd be interested in. Besides, the Gharu would be—

He jerked his attention back to the classroom. A student was reciting.

". . . And . . . uh, that way, everything was all mixed up with the taxes and the government couldn't get enough money. So King Weronar knew he'd have to get someone to help un . . . straighten the taxes out, so he . . . uh, well, Daniel Stern had been in the country for a couple of years, and he had . . . well, sort of advised. So the king—"

Don looked out the window again.

With this weather, the ranch would be quiet. Hands would be all in the bunkhouses, crowding around the stoves. Oh, well, he and Dad could fool around down in the range. Since Mom had— He jerked his head around to face the instructor.

Mr. Barnes was looking at him.

"Um-m-m, yes. That's good, Mara," he said. "Michaels, suppose you go on from there."

Don glanced across at the student who had just finished her recitation, but she merely gave him a blankly unfriendly stare. He looked back at the instructor.

"I lost the last few sentences," he admitted. "Sorry."

Barnes smiled sardonically. "Well, there's an honest admission," he said. "What's the last you picked up?"

Don shrugged resignedly.

"The appointment of Daniel Stern as Minister of Finance," he said. "That would be in eight twelve."

"You didn't miss too much." Barnes nodded. "You just got a little ahead. Take it from there."

"After a few months, the financial affairs of the kingdom began to improve," Don commenced.

"By the middle of eight thirteen, the tax reforms were in full effect. There was strong opposition to the elimination of the old system—both from the old nobility, who had profited by it, and from some of the colonists. But an Enforcement Corps was formed to see that the new taxes were properly administered and promptly paid. And the kingdom became financially stable." He paused.

Actually, he realized with a start, it had been Stern who had founded and trained the Enforcement Corps—first to enforce the revenue taxes, and later as a sort of national police force. And it had always been Stern who had controlled the Enforcement Corps. It was almost a private army, in fact. Maybe Pete— He continued his recitation.

"Then Prime Minister Delon died rather . . . rather suddenly, and the king appointed Mr. Stern to the vacancy. And when King Weronar himself died a little more than four years ago, Prime Minister Stern was acclaimed as prince regent." Don paused thoughtfully.

Delon's death had been sudden—and a little suspicious. But no one had questioned Stern or any of his people about it. And the death of the king and queen themselves—now there was . . . Again, he got back to his recitation.

"There was opposition to Mr. Stern's confirmation as Regent, of course, since he was a galactic and not native to the planet. But he was the prime minister, and therefore the logical person to take the reins." He frowned.

"The claims to the throne were—and still are—pretty muddled. No one of the claimants supported by the major tribes is clearly first in line for the throne, and no compromise has been reached." The frown deepened.

"Traditionally," he went on, "the Star Throne should never be vacant for more than five years. So we can expect to see a full conclave of the tribes within a few months, to choose among the claimants and select one to be either head of the clan Onar, or the founder of a new royal line."

Barnes nodded. "Yes, that's fairly clear. But we must remember, of course, that the tradition you mention is no truly binding law or custom. It's merely a superstitious belief, held to by some of the older people, and based on . . . well—" He smiled faintly.

"Actually, under the present circumstances, with no claimant clearly

in line, and with the heraldic branch still sifting records, it is far more practical and sensible to recognize the need for a continued regency." He took a step back and propped himself against his desk.

"In any event, most of the claimants of record are too young for independent rule, so the regency will be forced to carry on for some time."

He looked for a fleeting instant at the inconspicuous monitor speaker on the wall.

"As matters stand now, the tribes might find it impossible to decide on any of the claimants. As you said, there is no truly clear line. King Weronar died childless, you remember, and his queen didn't designate a foster son." He shrugged.

"Well, we shall see," he added. "Now, suppose we go back a little, Michaels. You said there was some opposition from the colonists to the tax reforms of eight twelve. Can you go a little more into detail on that?"

Don touched his face. He'd been afraid of that. Somehow, neither the book nor the lectures really jibed with some of the things he'd heard his father talk about. Something about the whole situation just didn't make full sense. He shrugged mentally. Well . . .

The door opened and a student runner came into the room. Don watched him walk up to Mr. Barnes with some relief. Maybe, after the interruption, someone else would be picked to carry on.

The youngster came to the desk and handed a slip to the instructor, who read it, then looked up.

"Michaels," he said, "you seem to have some business at the self-government office. You may be excused to take care of it."

Al Wells looked up as Don entered the office.

"What's the— Oh, Michaels. Got some questions for you on that row you stopped in the locker room yesterday."

"Oh? I thought my write-up was pretty clear. What's up?"

The self-government chairman leaned back.

"You said this Gerry Kelton banged into this kid, Waern, started pushing him around, and struck him once. That right?"

Don nodded. "That's about what happened, yes."

"And there was no provocation?"

"None that I saw."

"And you saw the whole affair?"

"Everything that happened in the locker room. Yes."

"Uh huh. And you said that two guys, Walt Kelton and Maurie VanSickle, pinned this kid's arms while Gerry started to slug him. That it?"

Don smiled. "He only got in one slap before I mixed in," he said. "Had his fist all cocked for more, though."

Wells nodded, looking curiously at Don.

"But they quit and turned the kid loose when you told them to?"

"That's right."

"Didn't give you any trouble?"

"No." Don shook his head. "Just some talk. Gave their names and class numbers. Oh, yeah, they squawked a little, sure. Then they took off for class."

Wells looked at Michaels appraisingly.

"Know anything about this Gerry Kelton?"

Don shook his head. "Heard a rumor or so last night," he admitted. "Never heard of him before then."

Wells laughed shortly. "We have. He's only got one year in this school, but we've had him in here several times. Know him pretty well by now. He got set back quite a bit in Primary, so he's some older than most of the Lower School bunch." He waved a hand.

"Oh, he's a brawler. We know that. But he doesn't start fights. He finishes them."

"He started this one."

"That right? And he quit when you told him to?"

"He did."

"Oh, no. That's not the Kelton. Last guy tried to stop him was out of classes for three days. Took five guys to bring Kelton in here." Wells shook his head.

"Look, we got him in here and he told us his story. The other two came up with the same thing later. Makes sense, too—if you know Kelton. It seems he and his brother ran into this kid, Waern, outside the auditorium right after Aud Call. They were talking about the newscast. And this kid came up and started an argument. Tried to slap Walt. They pushed him

off and went on their way. VanSickle went with them. He'd been in the crowd." Wells leaned forward.

"Got four witnesses to that, too, beside the three of them."

Don moved his head indifferently. "I wouldn't know about that. I wasn't there. All I know is what I saw in the locker room."

"Yeah. Yeah, sure. Then, they say they went on down to the locker room, after talking to some other students. When they got there, the Waern kid came flying at them again. Tried to bite and kick. They say you helped Maurie pull him off Gerry, and told 'em you'd take it from there. So they went on to class. They can't figure out where you got the idea of writing them up over it. Didn't know they'd been written up till we sent some guys up and pulled them out of their classes." Wells flipped his hands out, palms upward.

"So there's their story. How about it?"

Don shook his head. "Pretty well worked out. Fits the situation, too. Only one trouble. There's almost no truth in it. Pete Waern made no effort to hit any of those three while I was watching. And I didn't touch any of the four myself."

Wells laughed shortly. "That's what you're telling me. I've got a batch of statements telling the other story."

Don looked at the other for a moment. "Now wait a minute," he said slowly. "Are you trying to tell me what I saw and did?"

Wells shook his head. "Just trying to fill you in. This isn't my problem any more. Dr. Rayson's picked it up. Wants to see you. He's got Mr. Masterson with him and they're waiting for you to show up so they can talk things over with you." He tilted his head.

"I don't know. I've heard about some funny things these Khlorisanu can pull off if they can get a guy's attention for a while. And that kid's the real thing—from way back. Better think things over a little, maybe. See if you can remember any dizzy spells or anything."

"Oh, now check your synchs, Wells." Don waggled his head disgustedly. "I've heard those yarns too—down here. Look. All my life, I've been living on a ranch out in the mountains. Got Khlorisanu all over the place. They work for us up there." He grinned.

"Isn't a thing they can do that you and I can't do, too. They've got no special powers, believe me. I know."

"You'd find it pretty hard to tell that one to Doc Rayson and make it stick," Wells told him. "And he's the guy you've got to talk to." He reached into a basket on his desk and took out a stack of papers.

"Look, I've told you more'n I was supposed to all ready. Suppose you go over and talk to them for a while. They're waiting for you over in room Five."

Don looked at him for a moment, then went out.

He swung about and examined the

closed door thoughtfully, then massaged the back of his neck.

"What's wrong with these people?" he asked himself. "Don't they know how to break down a rigged story? Or can't they recognize one when they hear it?"

He crossed the hall.

"I'm Donald Michaels," he told the secretary. "I believe Dr. Rayson wants to see me."

The woman looked at him curiously.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Just a minute."

She got up and went into an inner room. After a moment, she came out and reclaimed her seat behind her desk.

"He's busy right now," she said. "I'll let you know when you can go in."

Don shrugged and sat down in one of the chairs that lined the wall. It wasn't a very comfortable chair.

"The anxious seat," he growled to himself. "Nice, time-tested trick."

There was no reading material at hand, and the walls of the oddly shaped room were blank. He amused himself by directing a blank stare toward the secretary. After a few minutes, she looked up from her work and jerked her head indignantly.

"Stop that," she ordered.

"Stop what?" Don looked innocent.

"Stop staring at me like that."

"Not staring at you," he told her. "I have to look somewhere and the chair faces your way. That's all."

The woman moved her hands. "Well, then face some other way."

"But I'd have to move the chair, and that would disturb your arrangements," Don told her reasonably. He continued his blank stare.

The woman resumed her work, then twitched her shoulders and looked at him resentfully for a few seconds. Finally, she got up and went to the inner office again. Don waited.

Again, she came out.

"They'll see you now," she said.

Don got up.

"Thank you."

He went through the door.

To his right, a man sat behind a wide, highly polished desk. The other was across the room, at a smaller desk. Both looked up as the door opened.

The man to Don's right nodded pleasantly.

"Well, so you're Donald Michaels? I'm Dr. Rayson."

"Yes, sir."

"That's good. Sit down." Rayson waved. "Right over there." He smiled confidently.

"Ah, that's fine. I'm the school psychologist, you know. You have met Mr. Masterson, the self-government faculty advisor, of course?"

Don nodded. "Of course. I'm in one of his classes."

"Well, that's good. Now, how do you feel this morning?"

"Quite well, thank you, sir."

"Well, then, we can talk about that little affair in the locker room,

can't we? Your memory is clear on it by now, isn't it?"

Don nodded.

"Well, that's fine. Now, suppose you give us the whole story. Don't leave out a thing. Then, we'll see what we can do for you."

Don smiled thinly, then flicked out a finger.

"I think that paper on your desk, sir, is the report I wrote last night. It's complete as it stands."

Masterson broke in, frowning. "We don't mean that thing," he said coldly. "What we want is a true, complete account of what actually happened."

Don faced him, his face tightening a little.

"Dr. Rayson has just that, sir," he said. "On his desk. I wrote it. I signed it."

Rayson raised a hand slightly.

"Just a moment," he said reprovingly. "There's no need for excitement or anger here. We're simply looking for a full, correct account." He cleared his throat. "Perhaps it would be well for me to make things clearer to you. Then, you'll recognize the problem." He looked down at the paper on the desk.

"You see, Donald," he continued, "we have already talked to a number of other students about this. And we have a complete account of the incident in so far as it concerned Petoen Waern." He smiled indulgently.

"What we are now concerned about is your own well-being. We need to know something of what happened to you after you were alone with the Waern boy." He spread his hands, then held them out, palms up.

"As to the actual physical action, that's quite simple. You see, there were a number of witnesses to the affair, and most of them have come forward." He rubbed his hands together, then laid them on the desk.

"So, we know precisely what happened that far.

"And we have a pretty good idea of what happened to you later, of course. This sort of thing has happened before. But by this time, you should have had time to recover to a great extent. At least, you should remember things much more clearly than you did when you wrote this report last night." He touched the paper with a smile.

"And with a little prompting and information, you should be able to fully recover your memory."

The smile became sympathetic. "Of course, I can understand your present confusion and your complete disbelief in your change of orientation. And I know it's quite an effort for a young man to admit he's been . . . well . . . shall we say influenced? But believe me, it's no disgrace. It's happened to quite a few others before you." He nodded thoughtfully.

"In fact, we are beginning to believe this Petoen Waern, like his uncle, is something of an adept at this sort of thing."

Don looked at him steadily.

"Do I act as though I were in a trance, sir?"

"Oh no. No, of course not. This sort of thing doesn't result in such a manifestation. This is something much more subtle than mere, gross hypnotism." Rayson smiled.

"However, you've had all night to partially recover. And these things seldom are fully effective for more than a few hours—unless the operator can get to his victim again, to fully fix the impression he has created."

Rayson placed the palms of his hands together. "No, by this time, one would expect your memories to be somewhat confused. So we can apply therapeutic methods." He nodded.

"Now go ahead. Try running through the whole story. Perhaps we can get a clue as to his methods. And if you have any ill effects remaining, I think they can be quite easily eliminated. Now, suppose you start with the time immediately after young Waern's attack on the Kelton boy."

Don shook his head wearily. "There was no such attack," he said. "It was the other way around. A large sized chap who later gave his name to me as Gerry Kelton, slapped a smaller fellow named Waern. At the time, two other fellows were holding Waern's arms. Rather tightly, too."

Masterson interrupted, shaking his head disgustedly. "We've got plenty of statements from witnesses. That isn't the way they read. Now how about it?"

"You mean the two Keltons and VanSickle?"

"No." Masterson was definite. "No. I don't mean them. There were several students around the doorway into that locker room during that entire show. We got stories from most of them." He waved a hand decisively.

"Now suppose you start using your head. Get busy and give us the thing the way it really happened. Then, we'll see what to do about you."

Don shook his head. "The locker room and the hall were empty for at least a full minute before those three came in," he said. "If you go over the people that signed those statements, you'll probably find that they were somewhere else at the time." He grinned.

"And from what I hear, this might give you an idea as to the membership of the Hunters, too."

"Hunters!" Masterson looked completely disgusted. "We've checked out a hundred crazy rumors about that alleged gang. Nothing there."

"Maybe so." Don looked at him critically. "But Jack Bordelle certainly sounded convinced last night. And how about Pete Waern? Didn't he tell you his side of this thing?"

"Ah yes, Waern." Dr. Rayson chuckled. "I believe these 'Hunters' are an invention of his uncle's. No, that young man didn't come in. His father is too smart for that. We won't see that young man again, unless we can have him brought in for this bit of work he did on you."

Don turned his head to stare across the desk.

Rayson smiled knowingly. "Oh, yes. Jasu Waern called early this morning. He said he was withdrawing Petoen from school. Said he planned to send him to a private school where he wouldn't be subject to indignities." He chuckled again.

"Jasu Waern is altogether too smart a man to let us question that youngster of his if he can prevent it." He looked searchingly at Don.

"You know," he added musingly, "I'm beginning to wonder about you, though. This might be serious. Possibly this Waern boy was more thorough than we thought possible. Possibly permanent damage could have been done." He got to his feet.

"Suppose you go over to that couch there and lie down. We'll try a little therapy, and see what we can do for you."

Michaels looked at him indignantly.

"I'm getting a little tired of all these tales about mental influence by the Khlorisanu. They're pure myth and I know it. I've lived all my life among these people. Believe me, if there were any such thing, my father or I would have come across it before now. And we'd know about it."

"You are then, ah, presenting yourself as an authority on parapsychology, perhaps?" Rayson pursed his lips. "This is a great accomplishment for one so young."

"I'm not an authority on anything." Don shook his head. "All I know is that I'd find it out right away if anyone tried anything like that on me. No one has—at least no Khlorisana has."

Rayson shook his head reprovingly. "Now, you say you have lived all your life among these people? Perhaps, then, you have been under—"

"Just a minute!" Masterson broke in sharply. "What's this about Jack Bordelle? He's your relief, isn't he, Michaels?"

"That's right." Don shrugged, then repeated his conversation with Bordelle. He smiled wryly as he finished.

"I'll have to admit," he added, "I did walk over and spend a few seconds checking the incinerator, at that. But . . . oh, well." He waved at the paper on Rayson's desk.

"And you didn't put that in your report?"

"No, sir. I didn't think there was any place for it there."

"Why not?"

"It wasn't material to the case in hand, sir. There was no evidence in Jack's comments. He made no threats or offers. And as far as I could tell, he was merely a disinterested person concerned in my welfare. Even though he seemed to believe what he was saying, it's pure hearsay."

"Hearsay!" Masterson snorted. "Pure invention." He leaned forward.

"Look," he said sharply, "we've been pretty patient with you. We've given you the benefit of every doubt we could think of. And we're get-

ting to the time-wasting stage." He waved a hand sharply across in front of his body.

"Now, I'd like to get some truth out of you. You've told us a little truth already. I believe you when you say you weren't subjected to any mental influence. I think the influence was very material indeed—in nice, purple ink—and it seems to have been pretty effective. How much was it?"

"How much?" Don frowned. "I wish you'd make yourself clear on that. What are you trying to say?"

"Just what you think I said," snapped Masterson. "How much did that youngster offer you to write up that incident the way you did? And have you the cash in hand yet?"

Don looked at the man carefully, noting the details of his appearance. Finally, he shook his head.

"Mr. Masterson," he said slowly, "up to now, I've always thought you were a good instructor and a fine advisor. I've sat in your classes, and I even developed a lot of respect for you. All at once, you've shown me how wrong I could be." He held up a hand.

"Be quiet," he said sharply, "both of you. And listen carefully. I want to make myself fully understood. I want to drive one thought into your stupid heads. You're in the wrong part of the galaxy for such remarks as that one you just made." He touched the corner of his mouth, then looked at his fingers.

"You see, this is at the edge of the Morek. There are Moreku here, in this school. And some day, you might talk to one of them." He smiled thinly.

"I am the only son of a border rancher, Mr. Masterson. We have a few thousand square kilos up in the Morek area, in the hills. And I have worked and played with mountain tribesmen all my life." He drew a long breath.

"Had a few fights with some of them, too. And some of their customs and a lot of their moral values rubbed off on me, I guess, though I've never been adopted into any clan.

"You just made a remark that is the absolute last word in insults up in the Morek. Nothing you could do or say could be worse. And there are, as I said, others from that area right here, in this school. Real clan members." He laughed shortly.

"Mister, what you said was, 'you sell yourself.' " He reached up to his lapel, twisting at the bronze button.

"If you should say that to a tribesman, your life would be over. Right then, unless you were very quick. And if you should be quick enough, or lucky enough, to kill the man you insulted, his clan brothers would take it up. It would be either you—or the whole tribe." He stood up.

"I'm not a tribesman. I don't carry the sling, and I'm of galactic ancestry, so I don't have a compulsion toward blood vengeance. But I don't accept that insult. I shall go back to the Morek today and place you out of my mind." He paused.

"No, I won't kill you. I'll simply

warn you so you'll have no excuse for such idiocy again." He smiled.

"You know, Mr. Masterson, I don't know how much they pay you by the year to sit around here, but I doubt that it's as much as I pay my beaters for a week end of hunting. So obviously, even if I were for sale, the man who could afford the tab could pick you up with his small change." He paused thoughtfully.

"Come to think of it, if your annual pay is more than my beaters get, I'll have to raise their wages. They do their job—intelligently."

He turned, then swung back for an instant. The bronze button had come out of his lapel. He tossed it on Masterson's desk.

"Here," he said. "A present for you. I can't stand the smell of it."

Dully, the two men sat, watching the closed door. At long last, Rayson

turned his head with obvious effort, to stare at Masterson, who recovered a few milliseconds more slowly.

But Masterson's recovery was the more violent of the two. He stared blankly at Rayson for an instant, then sprang to his feet.

"Why that young . . . ! I'll turn him every way but loose."

He sprang around his desk and took a stride toward the door.

"No, no." Rayson raised a hand warningly. "This is no way to handle such a matter." He smiled gently.

"After all, this young man succeeded in immobilizing both of us for a considerable time. In the first place, I doubt you'd be able to catch him. In the second, do you think he would stand still while you mauled him by yourself?"

Masterson turned around, frowning. "He caught me unprepared," he snarled. "He can't do that to me again. Not while I'm ready for him."

"No? I think he could. Any time, any place, and under almost any conditions. And I have much more experience in these matters than you, my friend. This is a very dangerous young man, and he requires special handling. Sit down and let us consider this young man."

Masterson growled impatiently, but returned to his desk. He sat down, glowering at his companion.

"Suppose you tell me what you're talking about," he demanded.

Rayson looked down at his hands, which rested on the desk.

"We have been talking about mental influence, I believe. In fact, we mentioned this very matter to our young friend. This is correct?"

"Sure we did. So?"

"And our young man was quite positive that he could never be so controlled and that any effort to do so would be immediately apparent to him. This is also correct, I believe?"

"That's about the way of it, yes. What are you driving at?"

Rayson sighed. "Let me remind you of something, then. You are, of course, of the Ministerial Investigative Force, just as I am. But our specialties are different. Your dealings are with the teaching and preparation of youth for useful citizenship, and with the prevention of certain gross misbehavior. Thus, you deal with those more obvious and material deviations from the socially acceptable and have little experience with the more dangerous and even less acceptable deviations with which I must concern myself." He smiled faintly.

"Your handling of this young man just now would indicate a quite complete lack of understanding of the specialty I have prepared myself for. And even if there were no other reasons, it would serve to point up the reason for our difference in relative rank. You must admit you got something less than desirable results." He cleared his throat and looked disapprovingly at Masterson.

"Of course, you are familiar with stories of mental influence. And I have no doubt that you have had some experience with this type of

thing, even though it is not in your direct line of work."

Masterson shook his head. "Sorry," he admitted. "This is the first time anyone's ever pulled anything like that on me."

Rayson inclined his head slowly. "So," he said softly. "Your lack of caution and discretion is more understandable, then. You have been quite fortunate, I should say. Of course, extreme individualism is far from common now, and persons who combine extreme individualism with high empathic power are rare, but they do appear. And they are dangerous in the highest degree." He spread his hands.

"A fully developed person of this type could do almost as he pleased and there would be no one who would be able to deny him or even check his course. You can see what I mean, surely?"

Masterson stared contemplatively into space. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I think I get the idea. A person like that could demand almost anything from almost anyone—and get it. But how would you go about it to restrain one of those people?"

"It can lead to difficulties." Rayson smiled reminiscently. "I can remember cases where—" He frowned.

"But no matter. We seldom allow them to reach high development. Very often, they betray themselves in little ways and we discover them quite early. We are then able to take care of them before they can do serious harm. Some, even, we are able to . . . ah . . . reorient, so that they become normal, useful subjects of the realm. But sometimes . . . well, we have to call upon the Guard and get heavy weapons. Complete elimination becomes necessary." He frowned.

"And sometimes, like our young friend, they gain considerable power which they manage to conceal, and only betray themselves when under stress. Then, they become dangerous in the extreme. And there is no really legal way in which they can be handled, since they haven't yet committed any overt act of violence." He shook his head.

"No, this young man will require quite special handling. He will have to be carefully watched, and will probably get to the stage where complete elimination is demanded. I shall set the process in motion immediately." He reached for the telephone on his desk.

Masterson looked at him thoughtfully.

"You say these people are pretty rare, and really dangerous?"

"Yes. To both questions, definitely yes."

"Well, then, I should think that anyone who managed to organize and direct the elimination of one of them would be likely to get quite a bit of credit. Might even lead to a good promotion."

Rayson took his hand from the telephone.

"This is true," he admitted. "You are thinking of—?"

Masterson nodded. "Why don't we pick up a few people and run this operation ourselves?" he asked.

Rayson shook his head. "The idea is excellent," he agreed. "But I really see no reason for a joint effort." He got to his feet.

"After all, you must admit the total implication of this matter was my discovery. I had to explain it to you. And thus, I can see no reason for making a full partnership of the matter." He raised a hand.

"Of course, you will receive credit in the matter," he added quickly, "and you might even find yourself advanced. But I shall have to insist on taking the final steps and directing the operation personally." He smiled coldly.

"I can consult with certain of my colleagues and get the necessary support. And when I have left, you may get in touch with your superiors and report the matter, telling them that action is being initiated. This way, we will both receive our due credit." He paused.

"Oh, yes," he added, "and you might interview this young Kelton again, with his companions. Thus, you will gather evidence for use in justifying my operations."

Masterson looked at him unhappily. "Well . . . all right," he agreed reluctantly. "Rank has its privileges, I suppose. And I guess in this case, that includes the collection of more rank. Suppose I'd better take what I can get."

"To be sure." Rayson smiled at him benignly. "This way, you are sure of profiting. Otherwise, you might run into disaster." He rose and strode toward the door.

"You may get those boys in for interview as soon as I leave," he said. "From them, you can get sufficient evidence of these powers of your young friend. Ah . . . and I would suggest that you use a little more discretion with them than you showed with this young Michaels of ours. You were a trifle—shall we say, crude?" He coughed.

"Then you may call in and advise Headquarters that evidence has been gathered and action is being taken in this case of Donald Michaels."

He turned and went out the door.

Masterson watched as the door closed, then reached into the back of a desk drawer. He took out a small box with a number of switches mounted on its top. For a moment, he examined the object, then he got to his feet and went to the window.

He stood, looking out of the window for a few moments, nodded, and let his fingers play among the switches. Finally, he nodded in satisfaction and went back to his desk.

He looked contemplatively at the telephone for a moment, then picked it up and started flipping at the dial.

The sports flier dropped free for the last few feet, bounced, tilted, and finally righted itself. It was not a very good landing.

Don snapped the switch off and sat for a moment, looking out at the long, low house. Then he let himself

out of the flier and walked across the courtyard and through the door.

The front room was empty. He looked over at the wide glass panels that formed one side of the room. A small, dark man came from between the bushes of the inner garden. He slid a panel aside and looked expressionlessly at Don for a moment. Then he slowly allowed his head to drop.

"Master Donald," he said. He raised his head, looking at Don with brilliant yellow eyes. "Your father did not expect you until two days."

"I know, Dowro. But I came home early. I want to talk to him."

"It is well." The man motioned toward a curtained arch. "He is below."

"Thanks, Dowro. I'll find him." Don swept the curtains aside and turned, to open a heavy door.

As he started down the steep flight of stairs, a sharp crack came from the basement. He grinned. With this kind of weather, the range would be busy.

Kent Michaels stood on the plastic flooring, a rifle at his shoulder. The front sight weaved almost imperceptibly, then steadied. He seemed completely unaware of his son's presence.

Suddenly, a spurt of smoke came from the muzzle of the rifle. There was another sharp crack and the muzzle swept upward then dropped, to become steady again.

At last, the shooter took the weapon from his shoulder and opened the action. He looked around.

"Oh, Don," he said. "Didn't expect you for a couple of days. There's no holiday down there right now, is there?"

Don shook his head. "I made a new one," he said. "Permanent type."

His father bent over the rifle action, examining it. Then he stepped over to place the weapon in a rack. Finally, he turned, to look searchingly at his son.

"Permanent?"

"Afraid so, Dad. I guess I sort of blew up."

"Want to tell me about it?"

The older man motioned Don to a camp stool and pulled one over for himself. As Don talked, he listened intently. At last, he nodded.

"So that's all of that, eh?"

"Guess it is, Dad. Looks as though I'll have to start working for my keep. Won't be any police official in the family after all."

"Could be." Kent Michaels got up and reached out to the weapons rack.

"Got one more shot on this target. Then we'll talk it over, hm-m-m?"

He stepped up to a line inlain in the floor. Deliberately, he placed a cartridge in the rifle and closed the action. Then, he raised the weapon, seated it on his shoulder, and brought it into position with a twisting motion.

Don watched, smiling in spite of himself, as the front sight rose and fell with his father's breathing. That routine never changed. From the time the Old Man picked up his weapon till he laid it down, you could predict every move he'd make.

The motion stopped and for endless seconds, the man stood motionless, the muzzle of his rifle probing steadily toward the lighted space downrange. Then the front sight jumped upward, settled back, and steadied again.

"Looked good." Kent Michaels let the weapon down, opened the action and checked it, then racked the weapon. He touched a button near the firing line and waited for the target to come in to him.

Deliberately, he unclipped the sheet of paper, laid it down, and clipped another in its place. He touched another button, then picked up the fired target and bent over it, checking his score. Finally, he looked up.

"Ninety-seven," he said. "Four X's. Think you can beat it?" He walked back to the rack and picked out a rifle. After glancing into the action, he held it out toward Don.

"Zero hasn't been changed since you fired it last. Want to take a couple of free ones anyway, just to be sure?"

Don looked at him indignantly.

"Good grief, Dad," he objected. "This is no time for a rifle match."

"Good as any, I'd say," his father told him. "Go ahead. There's a block of ammo at the point. Take your time, but you'll have to make 'em good." He sat down on his camp stool and waited.

Don looked at him for a few seconds, then shook his head resignedly and stepped up to the line.

"Oh, well," he said. "I'll try. Never mind the zero rounds."

He loaded the rifle and brought it to his shoulder. The sight weaved and bobbed. He brought it down again and looked back at his father. The older man pulled a cigarette from his breast pocket.

"Go ahead," he said calmly. "Take a few deep breaths. And relax."

Don bowed his shoulders and let the rifle hang loosely from his outstretched arms. He looked downrange, trying to drive everything out of his mind but the target hanging down there. Finally, he raised the weapon again. The sight bobbed about, then steadied. He put pressure on the trigger, then growled softly as the weapon fired.

"Oh, no! Drifted off at three o'clock."

His father exhaled a small cloud of smoke and said nothing. Don looked at him unhappily for a moment, then reloaded and brought the rifle up again.

Finally, the tenth shot smacked against the backstop and he racked his weapon and punched at the target return button.

His father got up and unclipped the sheet.

"Well, let's see," he said. "Eight, nine, nine . . . here's a nipper ten . . . nine . . . oh, me! You didn't do so well, did you?"

"What would you expect?" grumbled Don. "Give me a couple of hours to simmer down and I'll take you on. Beat you, too."

"Suppose you got into a fight,

Don?" his father asked. "Think the guy'd give you a couple hours to simmer down? So you could maybe shoot his eye out?"

He turned and led the way to a couple of lounge chairs.

"Sit down," he advised. "And turn on that light, will you?" He leaned back.

"So you gave Andy Masterson a fast outline on manners, eh?" He laughed softly. "Boy, I'd like to have seen his face about then!"

Don jerked his head around. "You know him, Dad?"

"You could say I did once," his father answered. "We went through Guard training together. Served on the same base a few times. Some years ago, I retired. I'm pretty sure he didn't."

Don pushed himself out of the chair and stood in front of his father.

"You mean Mr. Masterson is—"

Kent Michaels nodded slowly. "Stellar Guard Investigations? Yes, and I suspect he could wear quite a bit of silver lace, too, if he wanted to get dressed up." He clasped his hands behind his head.

"Let's see, Don, you're almost twenty now. Right?"

"That's right, Dad."

"Uh huh. And you were born here on Khloris. Means I've been out of active duty for quite a while, at that." He smiled.

"Got papers upstairs. They say I retired a little more than twenty-one years ago. Got official permission to live on an outworld and joined the first group of colonists here. Of course, they don't say anything about the people that told me to do all that."

Don stared at him. "What are you getting at, Dad?"

His father smiled. "Man retires, he's supposed to be all through with duty. Not subject to recall except in case of galaxy-wide emergency." He nodded thoughtfully.

"True. But a lot of people never really retire from the Guard. Things keep coming up, and that pension begins to look more like a retainer fee."

He held up a hand.

"Suppose I give you a little go-around on some history that isn't in the books—at least not in the books they use in these schools.

"Of course, you know about the arrival of the *Stellar Queen*. You've read all about the original trade contracts here in Oredan. And you've read a lot about the immigrations. And the border settlements.

"Yes, and you know about the accession of Daniel Stern, first to the Ministry of Finance, then to the Prime Ministry, then to the Regency. Quite a success story, that. And you have read about the mixup in the royal succession." He smiled.

"It all went about that way. Oh, sure, it wasn't quite as peaceable and orderly as the books make it look, but no history bothers with the minor slugfests. What they're concerned in is the big picture.

"Well, when the king agreed to colonization of the outer provinces,

quite a few people came crowding out here. And there was more than a little thievery and brawling and rioting. Naturally, the Federation Council was interested. And the Stellar Guard was more directly interested.

"So, they encouraged a lot of retired guardsmen to come out here, weapons and all. And they assigned a few more people to . . . well, sort of keep an eye on things. They set some people up with reasonably decent claims, saw to it that the rest of us got a good start, and left us to take it from there." He smiled.

"We had some fun, now and then. Got the border pacified. Got the crooks and the tough boys calmed down. And we got the hill tribes cooled off some, too. Even made friends with them—after a while. And some guys got married and made noises like real Khlorisanu—genuine Oredanu, in fact. A few of

them married Oredana girls." He laughed shortly.

"The Khlorisanu are humanoid—human to as many decimals as you need to go. There's a little minor variation in superficial appearance between them and the average galactic, but there's no basic difference. Quite a few of the fellows found the local girls made good wives.

"But anyway. There wasn't any real organization among us. We just . . . well, sort of knew what the other fellow was about. Kind of kept our own personal policy files. And things went along pretty well.

"Oh, there were some fellows who stuck to some sort of organizational structure, I suppose. You know how that is—some guys can't draw a deep breath unless the rest of the team is there to fill in the picture.

"And then, there were several people like Andy Masterson, who showed up from nowhere. That was none of my business. Happened to know Andy, but I've never talked to him here. Those people had complete new backgrounds. No Guard experience—it says here. And they joined the economy—took out Oredan citizenship. Some of them got into government work.

"Then this guy, Daniel Stern, showed up. He started grabbing influence with both hands. Smart young guy. Killed off a prime minister—we think—and a king. Can't prove any of that, though." Kent shook his head.

"Don't think we didn't try to stop him, once we realized what he was up to. We did. About that time, a whole lot of us did get together and organize. But he's one of those people. If he tells a man to go out and shoot himself, the next thing you hear is the sound of a falling body." His eyes clouded and he looked searchingly at Don.

"You should know what I mean. Like when you told that Ghar thief to tell us all about it—remember?"

"Look, Dad, that's something I'd like to know . . ."

Kent Michaels waved a hand. "So would I. But I know less about it than you do, so it's no use. All I know is that some people can tell most anyone to do almost anything—and it gets done. As I said, Stern seems to be one of them." He shrugged.

"Anyway, we lost a lot of good colonists before we decided to sit back and wait this boy out.

"It's been a long wait. Some of us have gotten rich in the meantime, in spite of Stern's trick taxes. Some of us have had a pretty rough time, I guess. But we're all growing older, and Stern's pretty cagey about immigration. Doubt if many guardsmen are getting in these days. We're going to have to depend on our kids, I think."

Don leaned forward.

"In other words, I could have kicked over an applecart?"

"Well, let's say you might have bent an axle on your own pretty, blue wagon. It's a good thing Masterson was there when you blew up. Anyone

else, and I might have come up short one son. I wouldn't like that too well. Might make me go down to Oreladar and try a little target practice." He frowned thoughtfully.

"You know, come to think of it, no one ever made me do anything I didn't want to do."

Don looked thoughtful.

"What do I do now?"

"Just what you said. Start working for your keep. If I get the news right, the waiting period is about over. Stern's finally dipped his toe in the water, with that business over Waern, and we might be able to do something. You just might get your teeth into it. And maybe I'll find myself going back to work.

"First, you'll have to go back to Riandar. Apologize to Masterson, of course, and give him a peace offering. I'll give you a bottle of Diamond Brandy before you leave. Be sure you hold the diamond in front of him when you stick the bottle out. Otherwise, he might throw something. He'll take it from there." The older man grinned.

"And if I remember Andy Masterson, he'll come up with enough work to keep you busy."

Andrew Masterson frowned at the bottle held before him.

"What's this?" he inquired. "You know better than to bring stuff like this on the grounds."

Don Michaels shrugged. "Dad said there wasn't too much of it around any more. Thought you might like some."

"Oh, he did? Yeah. Well, I'll take it as well meant. Might find someone who could use it." Masterson opened a drawer and thrust the bottle inside.

"He have anything else to say?"

Don nodded, looking at Masterson's suddenly watchful eyes. "He said if you'd come up our way, he'd show you how to hold 'em and squeeze 'em. Said maybe you might like to bring up some friends some time and give them a chance to find out what border life is like."

"Huh! You mean he's still playing games with those antique lead tossers?" Masterson grinned suddenly. "Thought he'd have outgrown that foolishness years ago. By the way, how's he shooting these days?"

"Fired a pinwheel after I told him about the row yesterday. Meant he only dropped three points on the target—standing."

"So? Maybe he could do damage with one of those antiques of his, at that—if he could get someone to hold still long enough for him to shoot at them. But nobody makes ammunition for the things any more. Where's he getting that?"

"Makes it himself." Don smiled. "He's got quite a workshop down in the basement."

Masterson nodded. "That's Kent Michaels, all right. O.K., youngster, I knew who you were in the first place. Just checking. Tell me, did he get you mixed up with that antique craze of his?"

Don nodded. "I beat him at it once in a while, sir."

"Did you hand him another beat-

ing yesterday? When you went out of here, it looked as though you were going to have to whip somebody."

Don frowned. "He made a monkey out of me. I couldn't stay on target."

"Uh, huh." Masterson nodded slowly. "Figures. Remember that, that it'll be the most valuable match you ever lost."

"Sir?"

"That's right. Yesterday, you got pretty well charged up. Even managed to warm up a secret police agent. Doesn't pay, believe me. About the time you get emotionally involved in a problem, the problem turns around and bites you. You're lucky. Someone else got bit instead—this time. You see, one of us didn't get shook up."

"I don't—"

Masterson tilted his head. "We had an unfortunate accident here right after you left. Dr. Rayson went rushing out of here and took off in his flier. Something went wrong—nobody's sure what. Maybe he didn't let his stabilizing rotors have time to lock in. Maybe a lot of things. Anyway, he flipped about fifty meters up. Came down pretty fast, and burned right by the parking lot. Quite a mess." He nodded sadly.

"Shame. Fine psychologist, and one of the best secret policemen in the realm."

"You—"

Masterson held up a hand. "Let's just say he was careless." He motioned.

"Sit down. No, not in the hot seat. Take that one over there. Then you can see things." He drew a long breath.

"Your father say anything about Stern?"

Don nodded. "He doesn't like him too well."

"He's got company. Know what Stern's trying to do, don't you?"

Don laughed uneasily. "I'm pretty well mixed up, to be truthful. From what Dad told me, he's trying to turn Oredan into a Dictatorship, with him at the head. Then, he'll take over the rest of the planet—a piece at a time."

"Close. He's planned it pretty well, too. He's got the royal succession pretty well balled up. He's almost ready to move in right now. Only one stumbling block. Know what that is?"

Don shook his head.

"Youngster named Petoen Waern. He's old enough—older than he looks. His mother's a niece of the last king. Conclave of the tribes could put him on the throne tomorrow morning. He's a bet Stern missed a while back. Now, he's trying to make up for it."

Don frowned. "Is that really why—"

"Right. That's why the row in the locker room. That would have eliminated that claimant in a hurry. Nobody wants a king with a family criminal record and a habit of starting brawls—especially when he loses those brawls. Kings just aren't supposed to go in for that sort of thing." Masterson smiled mirthlessly.

"Anyway, I doubt he'd have sur-

vived that affair if you hadn't rammed your neck into it."

"But there are other claimants. They'll come of age pretty soon."

"Sure they will. But that's pretty soon—and not soon enough. Besides, Stern's got them under control, along with their families—the important ones, anyway. There'd be a deadlock when a conclave started checking their claims. And somehow, their councilors wouldn't be able to come up with quite the right arguments.

"If a formal conclave meets, and no claimant is clearly eligible for the throne—know who'll be called to start a new royal line?"

"But he—" Don shook his head doubtfully.

"Yes, he could." Masterson shook his head. "Sure, he's regent. But he hasn't renounced his position as prime minister. And with his personal effect on people, he couldn't lose. No, the only reason he can't stand a conclave right now is one youngster—and one family he's never been able to control, because they stay out of his personal reach. And he almost got the youngster out of the way. Neat little operation, with only one thing that could go wrong. You."

Don frowned. "But that affair was just a personal—"

"Think so? Oh, sure, I gave the Hunters a big horselaugh yesterday. Rayson was around then. And Rayson was a pretty big boy. He knew all about the Hunters, I'm pretty sure. And I know better than to laugh about them." He leaned forward.

"I can't prove it, and it wouldn't do too much good if I tried, but I know perfectly well who's behind not only the Hunters, but a flock of other criminal gangs—juvenile and adult as well. Think I didn't know I was talking to a bunch of Hunters when I listened to that rigged story of theirs about the Keltons? Think I didn't realize Rayson was sitting there prompting them whenever they started to get confused?" He smiled.

"Maybe I'm stupid, but I'm not that stupid. The reason I was rough on you was the fact I didn't want you signing any statements that Pete had hypnotized—or what would you call it—you. That would have fixed the whole thing and they'd have had him." He coughed.

"And, too, I knew who you were, of course. I didn't know for certain how you stood, or how much you could do, but you looked good. And it was pretty obvious you had capabilities." He smiled.

"Some of the retired guardsmen have had sons go sour on them, you know, so I can't take 'em just on faith. But, as I said, the locker room deal looked good, and the more you talked, the better I liked it."

"But you—"

"Yeah, I know. I wasn't taking such a chance, though, at that. Truth of the matter is I'm about as bad as your father. You couldn't make me give you the right time if I didn't feel like it." Masterson's eyes crinkled in an amused smile.

"Go ahead. Try it."

Don shook his head. "I'll take your word," he said. "I tried to tell Dad off once. Somehow, things get a little unpleasant."

"Yeah." Masterson stretched luxuriously. "Anyway, I figured you'd be a lot handier around here alive and in operating condition. The last thing I could let happen would be for Rayson to get you on that trick table of his. Once he got that thing to rocking and rolling, he'd stand back there, making soothing noises, and almost anyone would break down and give him all they'd ever known. After that, they'd lie back and believe anything he felt like telling them." He waved a hand back and forth as Don started to speak.

"Later, huh? We can discuss all the ins and outs some day when this is all over. Right now, let's be getting back to business." He smiled disarmingly and leaned back in his chair.

"Somehow, Stern's hand has got to be forced. He's off balance right now, and we want him further off. We want him to make a move he can't back out of. And you may be able to make him do just that."

"I might?"

"Yes. Suppose the hill tribes joined with the Waernu and demanded that a conclave consider Pete's claim to the throne. What then?"

"I guess there'd be a conclave."

"There might, at that. Now, let's go a little further. Suppose the Waernu claim were upheld and we got a new king—let's see, he'd drop a syllable—King Petonar. Where would our friend, Stern, end up?"

Don grinned wolfishly. "Khor Fortress. Even I can figure that much out."

Masterson stood up and paced around the office.

"So, if we can get Jasu and his son in motion and get them up in the Morek, something's bound to break. Right?" He stopped in front of Don.

"Oh, of course, Stern might call out the Royal Guard and scream rebellion. He'd probably do just that, if things went that far. He's getting in the propaganda groundwork for it now. But what he doesn't know is that he'd help us that way." He perched on Rayson's desk.

"You see, we've got some colonists that would yell at the top of their lungs for protection of their interests by the Federation. And then there would be a conclave—with plenty of supervision. Either way, he'd get right into checkmate." He clasped one knee in his hands and rocked back and forth.

"But there's one thing that stands in our way. Jasu Waern's scared to death. We've never quite dared explain this whole thing to him, and now no one can get near enough to talk to him. Harle was the clan head and the one with the nerve. He's gone, and Jasu's holed up. Won't let his son out of the house. Won't let anyone in. We can't move."

He got back to his feet and walked over to the window.

"Now, let's take some more suppositions. Suppose a flier went out

of control and crashed in the middle of the Waern house. Or suppose some major criminal took refuge close to the place and decided to shoot it out with the Enforcement Corps. Seems to be a habit criminals have gotten into lately. And suppose a stray inductor beam just happened to graze the Waern living room.

"Then, who's checkmated?"

He looked down at his chair, then walked over and dropped into it.

"There's only one way to get Jasu in motion. You're it. The way you slammed Rayson back in his chair yesterday gave me an idea. You can get in there, and you'll have to move him—by force—compulsion—however you want to.

"Meantime, I'll get some things going. Your father can start the hill tribes getting together. He knows all the important head men. I'll give him a little push in that direction. Then, we'll get some more people to work."

Don looked at him for a moment. "Well, Dad told me I'd probably have to earn my keep. Anything else I ought to know?"

Jasu Waern looked up in annoyance, then got to his feet.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "How did you get in here?" He reached into a pocket.

Don Michaels spread his hands away from his body.

"Leave that weapon alone," he said sharply. "I came as a friend, and I'd hate to have someone shooting at me."

"But who are you?"

"I'm Donald Michaels. I want to talk to Pete . . . Petoen, I should say."

"My son is seeing no one. There has been—"

"I know," interrupted Don. "Trouble. Listen, I've had trouble myself in the past couple of days. It all started when I prevented a bunch of roughnecks from slapping Pete around." He frowned.

"Since then, things haven't been too pleasant." He held up a finger.

"I got accused of falsifying my report on the affair in the locker room. Pete didn't show up to testify, and everyone was looking at me." He extended a second finger.

"Pressure was put on me to sign a statement saying Pete used mental influence to make me put in a false statement. And I got into it with the school psychologist." A third finger snapped out.

"Next thing, I was being accused of accepting a money bribe from Pete. And I really got into it with the faculty advisor. That's not good." He dropped his hands to his sides.

"Right now, I'm not too popular at school. And I want to know what's going on. I want to know why Pete didn't show up to give me backing. I want to know what can be done to unscramble this mess."

Wearn shook his head slowly. "There are other schools—private schools," he said. "And we are still possessed of some—"

"Careful, Mr. Waern." Don held up a warning hand. "I don't carry

the sling, but I do come from the Morek. Don't say something that might be misinterpreted. I want to see things straightened out. I didn't come here to start a feud with you."

Jasu Waern shivered a little. "But you are galactic, are you not? Surely, you are no hillman."

"I was brought up among them. Now get Pete. I want to talk to both of you."

Waern looked unhappy. But he walked across the room and pulled at a cord.

A servant came to the door.

"Tell Master Petoen," ordered Waern, "that I would like to see him in here."

The man bowed and left. Waern turned back to Don.

"You see, Mr. Michaels," he said apologetically, "we are in difficult times here. My brother—"

"I know." Don nodded. "Pete was upset the other evening. He told me a little. A little more than is made public."

Waern's eyebrows went up. "He said nothing about that."

Don waved negligently. "It did no harm. Maybe it was a good thing." He turned toward the door, waiting.

Pete came in, looking about the room. "You brought Don Michaels here, Father?"

Waern shook his head. "He came. He insisted on talking to you, Petoen. And I find he is very persuasive."

"Oh." Pete turned. "I'm sorry, Don. Father thought that I—"

Don laughed shortly. "He was right—to some extent. But I'd like to talk to both of you about a few things."

He moved back, to perch on the edge of a heavily carved table.

"Let's look at it this way. I got into trouble over the affair. Not good, of course, but what happened to me is just one small incident. All over Oredan, good intentioned people have things happening to them. Sometimes, they're pretty serious things—like someone getting killed. And they usually can't figure out what hit them. These things happen pretty often. Why?"

Waern looked uncomfortable, but said nothing. Don looked at him curiously.

"Do you really think, Mr. Waern, that you can sit here in peace? That if you ignore this whole mess, it'll go away?"

Jasu Waern spread his hands. "What dare I do? My brother was trying to do something. He is gone."

"True. He tried to clean up a little here and fix a little there. And that only in one city. He didn't come boldly out and demand. He was playing on the edge of the board, not in the center. A king could do much more than that."

Waern looked at him, shaking his head.

"Yes, I know about the succession," Don told him. "And why shouldn't you demand? You could get the support of the hill tribes. All you need do is ask."

"I have thought of that. Perhaps we should have done that—once. But

now? After my brother's death? And what could the hillmen do against the weapons of the plains?"

Don smiled at him. "Would the hillmen believe the stories about your brother in the face of your personal denial before their own council? Would they accept such a thing about any of the Waernu unless it were proven by strong evidence? Yours is one of the clans, even yet, you must remember. And how about the honor of the Waernu?"

Jasu's face was suddenly drawn. Don continued.

"And would the plainsmen dare use their weapons against a legitimate claimant? For that matter, what good would their weapons be against a Federation Strike Group, even if they did use them?"

"You seem so sure."

"Not just sure. Certain." Don glanced at his watch, then frowned.

"We've lost a lot of time." His voice sharpened.

"Come on," he snapped. "My sportster will carry three people. Let's get out of here while we can still make it." He made shooing motions.

Waern moved toward the door, then turned.

"To the Morek?"

"That's right. Up to the Morek. We're going to start a feud."

Andrew Masterson looked at the handset approvingly. Little Mike was getting the idea. He was still just as fast as he'd ever been. He made a little noise in his throat, then spoke.

"Well, if you have any questions, Mr. Michaels, feel free to call us here. Thank you, and good-by."

He dropped the handset to its cradle and leaned back again.

So that was set up. Little Mike would be on his way out to the hills by the time he'd completed this next call. And he'd have the clans ready for talks with the Waernu. Now, the next step would be to alert Jahns, down in the Resident Commissioner's office.

He looked at the surface of his desk, considering, then reached for the phone again. He'd have to be careful on this one.

The door opened and two men came through. One of them held out a card.

"Masterson?"

"That's right."

"Like to have you come with us. People investigating Rayson's accident have some questions they'd like to ask you."

"Oh?" Masterson's eyebrows went up. "I'm afraid I wouldn't be much help on that. I saw him go down, of course, but the view from this window isn't the best. I really—"

The other shook his head. "Look, don't tell me about it. They just told us to come out and get you. Got a lot of experts down there. They'll ask the questions."

Masterson looked at the man appraisingly, then glanced at his partner, who stood by the door, leaning against the wall.

These two, he thought, would be no great problem. Nothing here but arms and legs. But—

He smiled to himself.

*It would be you or the whole tribe,* he thought.

He might still be able to remain under cover, and he'd be a lot more effective that way.

So maybe they were a little suspicious. He glanced down at the desk. The little control box was safely destroyed and its operation had left no evidence. Even if they did suspect the cause of Rayson's crash, they couldn't prove a thing. No, his best bet was to go along with these two and hope the questioning would be short enough to allow him to brief Jahns with plenty of time to spare. He shrugged.

"Well," he said aloud, "I'll go with you, of course, though I don't see how I can be of any help. Terrible thing, losing Rayson that way."

"Yeah. Real bad." The other nodded curtly. "Come on. Let's go."

Daniel Stern looked angrily at his aide.

"Just who is responsible for this report?" he demanded.

The aide looked aside. "It came in from Riandar Headquarters, your honor," he said. "Colonel Konir signed it himself."

"I can read," snapped Stern. "But who's responsible? What idiot let this thing fall apart?" He shook the papers angrily.

"Look at this thing," he ordered. "Simple instructions were issued. With the organization they have up there, any fool could have carried them out. So long as they kept it simple, even an idiot could have eliminated that Waern nuisance. But no! Someone had to be subtle. Someone had to make a big project out of it. And, of course, something went wrong." He snorted angrily and slapped the papers down on his desk.

"Rayson was responsible in part, I suppose?"

The aide nodded unhappily and Stern let out an explosive breath.

"Your man! Well, at least, where he is, he can do no more harm. Tell me, are they going to get a confession out of that man, Masterson?"

"I doubt it, your honor. He claims to know nothing of the accident. And there isn't a scrap of evidence that—"

"Evidence! There's very little doubt is there? With those notes of Rayson's? And who else could have caused the crash?"

"Well, there certainly is no other—"

"Of course not. We know Masterson did it somehow. But why?"

The aide said nothing and Stern glared at him.

"Who is this Masterson?" he demanded. "Have you checked back on him?"

"He came here from Nogira," said the aide slowly, "seventeen years ago. He had some civil police experience there. We've checked that. He has a degree in criminalistic science. We checked that, too. Not a suspicious move since he came here. He was in the Civil Branch for a few years, then was assigned to instructional duty. He's got a perfectly clean record."

Stern shook his head slowly, then looked down at the desk again.

"Just that little," he growled. "He could have simply hated Rayson for some private reason. He could have seen him as an obstacle. We could care less about that." He tapped at a paper.

"Or, he could be working with the Waernu. And that's probable. He could even be an undercover agent for the Federation, though that seems a little improbable. He's been here too long. Hah! He could be almost anything except what Rayson thought." He looked up.

"Well, don't let him go. Keep him out of circulation. In fact, you better have him put in tight confinement. We'll look into him more closely later. Right now, I want to know what became of that Waern boy."

The aide pointed at the papers on the desk. "The boy and his father are reported to have left their residence, your honor. It is thought

they went with that same Donald Michaels who interfered with the original plan."

Stern nodded. "The boy Rayson had right in his hands, and then let go. Yes." He looked around the room, then got to his feet.

"Tell me, has any progress been made on locating the Waern 'Book of Ancestors'?"

"No, your honor. Records has located and destroyed the last of the evidence here in Oreladar. But the Waern copy has not yet been located."

Stern nodded. "Find out who is responsible for the long delay in discovering the Waern claim, Lander. That is inexcusable." He frowned.

"Now, to the Waernu. Did anyone see them leave their home?"

The aide shook his head. "Observers say Michaels' flier landed in the Waern courtyard. A few minutes later, it took off and headed toward the mountains. The observers were unable to determine how many people were in the flier when it departed. It left too abruptly and traveled too fast. They determined its direction, but were unable to follow it."

"Valuable men! I think we should take careful note of all those people up at Riandar. Possibly they should be reassigned to duties more suited to their abilities. Tell me, did anyone have the elementary intelligence to have this flier tracked?"

"They tried, your honor. But it disappeared in the canyons, flying very low. Search fliers have been operating for several hours, but no trace of it has been found."

Stern nodded. "Well, we won't discuss it any further," he decided. "You know my feelings on the Riandar people. I should say it would be safe to assume the Waernu are holed up in Michaels' home. Get the exact location of that place. Then set up an Enforcement Corps operation." He frowned.

"Get some men out to make sure those people don't go into the hill country before we can take care of them. You can use the search planes for that. Then attend to your advance publicity and set up elimination. You'll give that personal supervision, all the way through. Clear?"

The aide nodded.

"Very well. See that you make it simple. I'm not going to tell you how to handle this in detail, but I expect to watch a broadcast showing their removal within the next three days. Get started."

"Yes, your honor." The aide backed out of the room.

Stern watched the door close behind the man, then faced around as a dry voice sounded behind him.

"Real nice, Danny," it said. "You went through it without a stumble. Even came up with something of your own. You're learning, Kid."

Stern glared at the scrawny man.

"I thought you picked those people up at Riandar. I thought you said they knew how to do things."

The other shrugged and spread his hands. "Well, Danny," he said, "you

know how it is. Once in a while, we underestimate the opposition, and they slip one over." He leaned back in his chair, staring at Stern.

"But maybe this way, it's even better," he added. "We get a few in the net we didn't even suspect existed, you see?" He paused.

"I think you should have a talk with this Masterson yourself," he went on. "Maybe you should tell him to give us some of this information he has, eh?"

Stern looked at him in annoyance. "I expect you and the rest of the people around here to do some work, Gorham. After all, I'm the regent. Do I have to do everything?"

Gorham got to his feet and brushed some of the dust from his trousers.

"I tell you, Danny," he said seriously, "some of these little things, you have to be doing. Some of these things, only your talent will take care of, no?" He held up one hand, waggling a finger in the air.

Stern glared at him.

"Gorham," he snapped, "I think I'll have to remind you of your place." He tapped himself on the chest.

"I'm the regent, remember? I'm the kingpin here. You're just a senior executive secretary. You wanted it that way, and that's the way it is. But I expect you to start doing some work. I don't care how you get information out of that man, Masterson, but I expect you to get it. I certainly don't intend to do your work for you. Now get at it!"

Gorham considered him for a moment, then walked slowly across the room till he stood before Stern's desk.

"Now, Danny-boy," he said softly, "don't you go trying that funny stuff on old Jake. It don't work so good, remember? Nobody ever tells old Jake he should do things. Nobody!"

He planted his left hand on the desk before Stern and leaned over a little.

"We got an agreement, you and I, remember? I do the thinking. Me —old Jake Gorham—I'm the brain. You got this talent, see. You tell people they should go do something, they go do it. But not old Jake. No, no. With him, it don't work so good. Everybody else, maybe, but not old Jake." He waved his head to and fro, keeping watchful eyes on Stern.

The younger man slammed his hands to his desk, pushing himself back.

"You listen to me, old man," he snapped. "We had an agreement—once. And you've been using it to ride my back ever since. It's come to an end. Right now." He got to his feet, his deepset eyes seeming to flame.

"From now on, I'm the top man, do you understand?" His lip curled.

"I'm the regent. I'm the law. I tell these people what to do, and they do it. And I can tell them to take you out and shoot you. Don't forget that." His hand started toward a button on his desk.

Jake Gorham's hand blurred into motion and a small weapon was sud-

denly in it. He pointed it at Stern.

"Sit down, Danny-boy," he ordered menacingly. "Sit down. And listen. Listen real good." He spread his legs a little.

"Like I said, I'm the brains here. I do the thinking. Remember back in Tonar City? Remember what happened, you tried once to run things for yourself? Remember who came along and pulled you out just in time?" He laughed shortly.

"Yeah, you need old Jake. You gotta have him. You think you just tell these people—they should do anything you want. Oh sure. That lasts for a while, maybe, but they get tired. Just like on Konelree, remember? And what do you do when a whole mob moves in on you? Eh? What do you do? You ain't got the moxie to handle no mobs, remember?

"But old Jake, he thinks of things, and we both get along real good. Yeah, Danny-boy, you need old Jake." He glanced down at his weapon, then waved it from side to side.

"But you know something else? Old Jake, he don't need you so much. Oh, sure, it's nice here. I like it real good. But I got along real nice for a long time before I picked you up, you see what I mean. You didn't do no good at all. Talent, you got. But brains? No, them they didn't give you. And they didn't give you much guts, either, Danny-boy. Them, I got.

"And you know something else, Danny-boy? I got all kinds evidence. You done some pretty bad things here, remember?" He smiled, exposing yellow teeth.

"Real bad things, they wouldn't like them at all. And I can prove all them things. Me, I ain't got no responsibility. I'm just a poor, little old guy you keep around for laughs, remember?" He chuckled.

"You tell them to take me out and shoot me? I should laugh. You reach for that button. Go ahead. Stick your finger out. Then this thing here, it sings you a little song. And I go get some papers I got somewhere around here. And I go get some recordings. And maybe a few pictures. And then Old Jake's a public hero. And he takes a lot of money and goes away from here, he should spend his old age some place where he likes it better." He waved the weapon again.

"Still want to play?"

Stern's face was bloodless. He dropped into his chair, then put his head in his hands.

"I'm sorry, Jake," he said. "Sorry. I guess I'm just a little tired right now. Forget it, will you?"

"Sure, Danny-boy. Sure. We forget all about it. Now suppose we quit for the night, eh? Then in the morning, we get this Masterson fellow in here. And you find out from him just who he is and why he comes here. And you can let him tell us what he's been doing and who he's been working with, eh?" Gorham smiled and stuck the weapon back in his sleeve.

"We ain't doing so bad," he went on. "We ain't doing bad at all." He reached out to stir the papers on Stern's desk with a forefinger.

"These people up at Riandar, they don't do so good maybe on that

Waern kid. But they don't do so bad all the time. They get this Masterson, see? Right away, they're on him, soon as this guy Rayson gets himself killed off."

Stern nodded. "Yes," he admitted, "at least, they did have the sense to pick up Masterson—after he'd done plenty of damage. They were pretty slow. And they missed the Michaels boy entirely. So now, the Waern boy is out of easy reach." He frowned.

"We had things set up for an elimination on him, you know."

Gorham wagged his head. "Makes very little. Him, we can get. Him, they take care of in a couple days. Same operation, they should just move it a few miles, eh? Your boy with all them buttons, he takes care of that, see?" He grinned.

"And that takes care of this Michaels kid, too." Again, he poked at the papers.

"And here, we got another report. This young Michaels' father, he talks to this guy Masterson on the phone. You see that? And right away, he heads for the mountains. Maybe he wants to talk to the hill people, eh?" His grin became wider.

"But somebody at Riandar, he gets a rush of brains to the head, see? And the border patrol, they challenge this old guy, you get it? Just a routine check, see, but the old guy, he don't get the word so quick.

"So they don't take no chances. They knock him down in some canyon up there." He shrugged.

"So all this leaves this Masterson, you could talk to him, maybe he sings us some nice music." He turned away.

"I stay around, back at my desk. Maybe I should think of a question or two while we talk, the three of us, eh?"

The royal gold and blue receded from the screen and Merle Boyce's face looked out at his audience.

"This," he said shortly, "is the second day of the hunt for the Wells gang." He came out from behind his desk, his piercing eyes intent.

"For the past full day, this group of robbers have made their way toward the west. It is thought they hope to join rebellious hill tribes somewhere in the Morek region." He paused.

"Late yesterday afternoon," he continued, "these four men burned their way through a road block near Riandar. And despite reinforced blocks and stringent sky checks, they are still at large. All subjects of the realm are urgently requested to notify the authorities of any suspicious strangers."

He faded from the screen, to be replaced by the figures of four men.

"In co-operation with the Enforcement Corps," his voice continued, "we are showing pictures of the fugitives. We see here, Howard Wells, Merla Koer, Dowla Wodl, and Jake Milton." The voice stopped for a moment, then continued.

"These men are regarded as extremely dangerous. Subjects are urged to make no effort to approach them personally. Notify the authorities immediately if they are seen."

Don reached to the switch and snapped the receiver off.

"I don't like it," he said slowly. "I don't like any part of it."

"Think we might have visitors?" Pete looked at him thoughtfully.

Don nodded. "It could be just a build-up," he said. "Did you get that thrust about the tribes?"

Jasu Waern cleared his throat. "You mean those four are perhaps—"

"I doubt if those four ever lived," Don told him. "At least not with those names. If we have visitors, they'll be more official—and a lot more dangerous." He paused.

"Wish Dad had come back. I'd like to get you off to the hills. Not so comfortable, perhaps, but it would be safer. He looked at the ceiling.

"Of course, with all those fliers chasing around right now," he added, "it might be complicated."

Pete looked at him curiously. "One thing I can't figure, Don," he remarked. "Why didn't you head right on into the hills from Riandar?"

Don spread his hands. "Intended to, hang it," he said. "They loused me up. Remember the dipsy-doodle I turned in that box canyon?"

"Think I'd forget?" Pete grinned. "Nearly got a busted head out of that one."

"Yeah. Well, I'd planned to jump the ridge and go on over to a clan village I know. We nearly caught it right there."

"We did?"

"Uh, huh. Some border patrol ship had a ripper. Lucky he got overanxious. He cut loose out of effective range and shook us up. That gave me the news and I ducked for cover and streaked for home before he could get to us for a better shot."

"And now, you think perhaps they are trying to hunt us down as they did my brother?" Jasu Waern shook his head. "But this—it would be impossible to represent us as . . ."

Don tilted his head. "Nothing impossible about it—if they know where we are." He looked around the room.

"And it looks as though they do. Someone probably spotted my flier when I landed in your courtyard."

Pete looked at him unhappily. "Maybe we moved right into his hands. Maybe we're better targets here than we were in the city."

Don moved his head from side to side decisively. "Never happen. This mythical Wells gang could have been holed up in the city, too, you know. And there, you'd have no warning. You'd have no defense and nowhere to go. This isn't some little summer cottage, you know. We can give them a bad time."

Jasu Waern shook his head sadly. "Yes," he admitted, "we can, as you say, give them a bad time. But a flash or two from one of their inductors will destroy this house just as surely as it did my brother's cottage."

"Maybe." Don smiled. "I've got some ideas on that, too. But there's more to this house than you see from outside. This place was built during the border wars, you know. We've got a place to duck to."

Pete stood up. "What's that?"

"There's a basement under this house. Shelters down there. Even total inductor destruction of the house wouldn't hurt anyone down there." Don pointed with a thumb.

"Got entry locks right out in the court."

"But their clean-up crews. Where would you hide from them?"

Don shook his head, smiling. "They won't do too much searching," he said calmly. "If they actually do attack this place, they'll get some genuine resistance. And there'll be a Federation patrol out here right after the shooting, to investigate the destruction of a Galactic Citizen's property."

His smile broadened. "At least, that'll be a good excuse. You see, Mr. Masterson's alerted people at the Commissioner's office. They know who's here—or will, when the shooting starts."

"But with this build-up, it will seem like an ordinary hunt for a criminal gang." Pete shook his head doubtfully.

"No, I don't think so." Don walked over to the heavy door leading to the range.

"Better get some of the weapons up here now, though. We'll have to give them a little show."

Pete looked at him curiously.

"Why bother?" he asked. "Why can't we just duck into the shelter and let 'em blast? Then we could wait for the patrol."

Don shook his head.

"The type of resistance offered will be a tip-off to the Guard," he said. "I'm going to use an unusual type of weapon. Besides, Stern's people have detectors. Remember those? There's got to be life force in detector range, or they'll assume we've either deserted the place or found refuge below ground. Then they would come in for sure. And they'd really search the place." He smiled grimly.

"I'd rather take my chances on getting shelter from a blast after they commit themselves than take on a batch of those monkeys in a hand-to-hand down in the basement." His smile faded.

"It'll be touch and go, at that. The force of an inductor blast is nothing to joke about. We can roll into the ledges and hope, but we still might get singed a little." He sighed and spread his hands.

"Well, I asked for work. Guess I've got it. Sorry you may get scorched around the edges, but—"

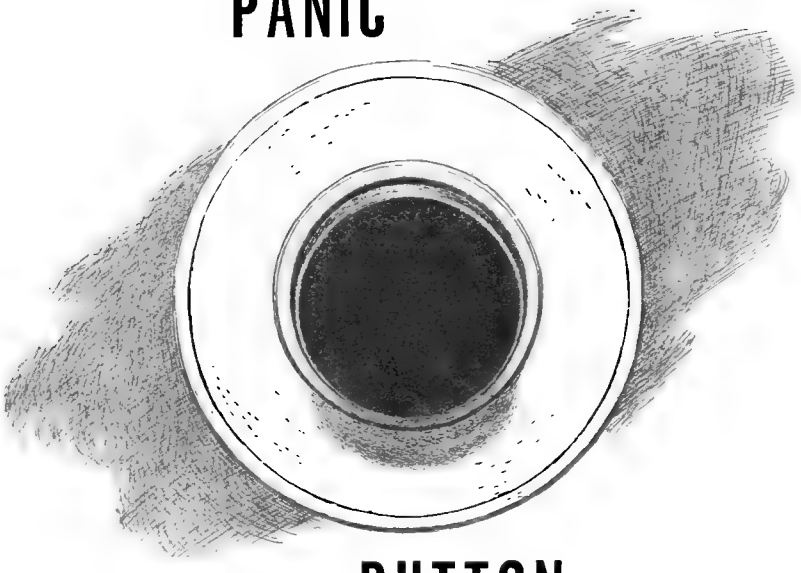
Pete looked at the heavy wall on the other side of the outer court.

"At least, we've got a better chance than Uncle Harle had. They probably tied him up. And no matter—" He shrugged.

"All right, Don, let's get those weapons."

TO BE CONCLUDED

# PANIC BUTTON



## BY ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

***It's not** hard to disarm a dangerous weapon whose nature you know thoroughly. The one that simply cannot be disarmed, by any conceivable means, however, has a special characteristic . . .*

Illustrated by van Dongen

HE law of chance," said Lagasta ponderously, "lays it down that one cannot remain dead out of luck for everlasting." He had the fat oiliness typical of many Antareans; his voice was equally fat and oily. "Sooner or later the time must come when one finds a jewel in one's hair instead of a bug."

"Speak for yourself," invited Kaznitz, not caring for the analogy.

"That time has arrived," Lagasta went on. "Let us rejoice."

"I am rejoicing," Kaznitz responded with no visible enthusiasm.

"You look it," said Lagasta. He plucked a stalk of grass and chewed it without caring what alien bacteria might be lurking thereon. "We have found a new and empty world suitable for settlement. Such worlds are plenty hard to discover in spite of somebody's estimate that there must be at least a hundred million of them. The vastness of space." He ate a bit more grass, finished, "But we have found one. It becomes the property of our species by right of first discovery. That makes us heroes worthy of rich reward. Yet I fail to see delirious happiness on what purports to be your face."

"I take nothing for granted," said Kaznitz.

"You mean you sit right here on an enormous lump of real estate and don't believe it?"

"We have yet to make sure that nobody has prior title."

"You know quite well that we subjected this planet to most careful examination as we approached. Intelligent life cannot help betraying its presence with unmistakable signs for which we sought thoroughly. What did we see? Nothing! Not a city, not a village, not a road, not a bridge, not one cultivated field. Absolutely nothing!"

"It was a long-range survey of the illuminated side only," Kaznitz pointed out. "We need to take a much closer look—and at both sides."

Havarre lumbered over and sat beside them. "I have ordered the crew to get out the scout boats after they have finished their meal."

"Good!" said Lagasta. "That should soothe Kaznitz. He refuses to believe that the planet is devoid of intelligent life."

"It is not a matter of belief or disbelief," Kaznitz gave back. "It is a matter of making sure."

"We are soon to do that," Havarre told him. "But I am not worried. The place looks completely uninhabited."

"You can't weigh up a world with one incoming stare no matter how long and hard you make it," Kaznitz asserted. "The absence of people spread widely and in large numbers doesn't necessarily mean no concentration of them in small number."

"You mean Terrans?" queried Havarre, twitching his horsy ears.

"Yes."

"He's been obsessed with Terrans ever since Plaksted found them encamped on B417," remarked Lagasta.

"And why shouldn't I be? Plaksted

had gone a long, long way merely to suffer a disappointment. The Terrans had got there first. We've been told that they're running around doing the same as we're doing, grabbing planets as fast as they can find them. We've been warned that in no circumstances must we clash with them. We've strict orders to recognize the principle of first come first served."

"That makes sense," opined Havarre. "In spite of years of haphazard contact we and the Terrans don't really know what makes the other tick. Each side has carefully refrained from telling the other anything more than is necessary. They don't know what we've got—but we don't know what they've got. That situation is inevitable. It takes intelligence to conquer space and an intelligent species does not weaken itself by revealing its true strength. Neither does it start a fight with someone of unmeasured and immeasurable size, power and resources. What d'you think we ought to do with Terrans—knock off their heads?"

"Certainly not!" said Kaznitz. "But I shall feel far happier when I know for certain that a task force of one thousand Terrans is not snoring its collective head off somewhere on the dark side of this planet. Until then I don't assume that the world is ours."

"Always the pessimist," jibed Lagasta.

"He who hopes for nothing will never be disappointed," Kaznitz retorted.

"What a way to go through life," Lagasta said. "Reveling in gloom."

"I fail to see anything gloomy about recognizing the fact that someone must get here first."

"How right you are. And this time it's us. I am looking forward to seeing the glum faces of the Terrans when they arrive tomorrow or next month or next year and find us already here. What do you say, Havarre?"

"I don't think the subject worthy of argument," answered Havarre, refusing to take sides. "The scout boats will settle the issue before long." He got to his feet, ambled toward the ship. "I'll chase the crew into action."

Lagasta frowned after him. "The company I keep. One has no opinions. The other wallows in defeat."

"And you wag your tail while the door is still shut," Kaznitz riposted.

Ignoring that, Lagasta gnawed more grass. They sat in silence until the first scout boat came out, watched it take off with a loud boom and a rising whine. A bit later a second boat bulleted into the sky. Then more of them at regular intervals until all ten had gone.

"Waste of time, patience and fuel," declared Lagasta. "There's nobody here but us first-comers."

Kaznitz refused to take the bait. He gazed at the ragged horizon towards which a red sun sank slowly. "The dark side will become the light side pretty soon. Those boats won't get back much before dawn. Think I'll go and enjoy my bunk. A good sleep is long overdue."

"It's a wonder you can enjoy any-

thing with all the worries you've got," observed Lagasta with sarcasm.

"I shall slumber with the peace of the fatalistic. I shall not sit up all night eating weeds while tormented with the desire to be proved right and the fear of being proved wrong."

So saying, he went to the ship conscious of the other scowling after him. Like all of the crew he was sufficiently weary to fall asleep quickly. Soon after dark he was awakened by the switching on of the radio beacon and the faint but hearable sound of the subsequent *bip-bip-yidder-bip*. Much later he was disturbed by Havarre going to bed and, later still, by Lagasta.

By dawn they were so deep in their dreams that none heard the return of the scout boats despite the outside uproar ten times repeated. They grunted and snuffled in unconscious unison while nine pilots emerged from their vessels looking exhausted and bored. The tenth came out kicking the grass and jerking his ears with temper.

One of the nine stared curiously at the tenth and asked, "What's nibbling your offal, Yaksid?"

"Terrans," spat Yaksid. "The snit-gobbers!"

Which was a very vulgar word indeed.

"Now," said Lagasta, displaying his bile, "tell us exactly what you saw."

"He saw Terrans," put in Kaznitz. "Isn't that enough?"

"I want no interference from you," Lagasta shouted. "Go squat in a thorny tree." He switched attention back to Yaksid and repeated, "Tell us exactly what you saw."

"I spotted a building in a valley, swept down and circled it several times. It was a very small house, square in shape, neatly built of rock slabs and cement. A Terran came out of the door, presumably attracted by the noise of my boat. He stood watching me zoom round and round and as I shot past the front he waved to me."

"Whereupon you waved back," suggested Lagasta in his most unpleasant manner.

"I made muck-face at him," said Yaksid indignantly, "but I don't think he saw me. I was going too fast."

"There was only this one house in the valley?"

"Yes."

"A very small house?"

"Yes."

"How small?"

"It could be described as little better than a stone hut."

"And only one Terran came out?"

"That's right. If any more were inside, they didn't bother to show themselves."

"There couldn't have been many within if the dump was almost a hut," Lagasta suggested.

"Correct. Six at the most."

"Did you see a ship or a scout boat lying nearby?"

"No, not a sign of one. There was just this house and nothing more," said Yaksid.

"What did you do next?"

"I decided that this lonely building must be an outpost belonging to a Terran encampment somewhere in the vicinity. So I made a close search of the district. I circled wider and wider until I'd examined an area covering twenty horizons. I found nothing."

"You're quite certain of that?"

"I'm positive. I went plenty low enough to detect a camp half-buried or well camouflaged. I couldn't find even the smell of a Terran."

Lagasta stared at him in silence a while and then said, "There is something wrong about this. A Terran garrison could not cram itself into one hut."

"That's what I think," Yaksid agreed.

"And since it cannot be within the building it must be some place else."

"Correct. But there was no sign of it anywhere within the area I covered. Perhaps one of the other scout boats passed over it and failed to see it."

"If it did, the pilot must have been stone-blind or asleep at his controls."

Kaznitz interjected, "That wouldn't surprise me. We landed short of sleep and the pilots haven't been given a chance to catch up. You can't expect them to be in full possession of their wits when they're mentally whirly."

"It was necessary to make a check with the minimum of delay," said Lagasta defensively.

"That's news to me."

"What d'you mean?"

"You gave me clearly to understand that the check was a waste of time, patience and fuel."

"I said nothing of the sort."

Havarre chipped in with, "What was said or not said is entirely beside the point. The point is that we have to deal with the situation as it exists. We have landed in expectation of claiming a planet. Yaksid has since found Terrans. Therefore the Terrans were here first. What are we going to do about it?"

"There is no problem to be solved," said Kaznitz before Lagasta had time to answer. "We have been given orders simple enough for a fool to understand. If we arrive first, we claim the planet, sit tight and invite any later Terrans to take a high dive onto solid rock. If the Terrans arrive first, we admit their claim without argument, shoot back into space and waste no time beating them to the next planet."

"Where *is* the next one?" inquired Lagasta with mock pleasantness. "And how long is it going to take us to find it? Inhabitable worlds don't cluster like ripe fruit, do they?"

"Certainly not. But what alternative do you suggest?"

"I think we'd do well to discover this missing garrison and estimate its strength."

"That would make sense if we were at war or permitted to start a war," said Kaznitz. "We are not permitted. We are under strict instructions to avoid a clash."

"I should think so, too," contributed Havarre. "Before we enter a war

we must know exactly what we're fighting."

"There is nothing to stop us gathering useful information," Lagasta insisted.

"It's impossible for us to collect military data worth the effort of writing it down," Kaznitz gave back. "For the obvious reason that it will be years out of date by the time we get back home."

"So you think we should surrender a hard-earned world for the sake of one crummy Terran in a vermin-infested hut?"

"You know quite well there must be more of them somewhere around."

"I don't know it. I know only what I've been told. And I've been told that Yaksid has found one Terran in a hut. Nobody has seen a trace of any others. We should make further and closer search for others and satisfy ourselves that they really are here."

"Why?"

"It's possible that these others don't exist."

"Possible but highly improbable," Kaznitz opined. "I can't see Terran explorers contenting themselves with placing one man on a world."

"Perhaps they didn't. Perhaps he placed himself. The lone survivor of a space disaster who managed to get here in a lifeboat. What would be the worth of a Terran claim in those circumstances? We could easily remove every trace of the man and the hut and deny all knowledge of either. It couldn't be called a clash. One Terran just wouldn't get the chance to clash with a crew six hundred strong."

"That may be, but—"

"If we make more systematic search and find other Terrans in garrison strength, that will settle the matter and we'll take off. But if it proves that there are no others—" He let his voice tail off to add significance, finished, "All that stands between us and a world is one hunk of alien meat."

Kaznitz thought it over. "I dislike giving up a new planet fully as much as you do. But I'd dislike it even more if we were saddled with the blame for starting something that can't be finished. I think we'd like death and love it rather than endure the prolonged pain."

"Blame cannot be laid without someone to do the blaming," said Lagasta, "and a dead Terran positively refuses to talk. You worry too much. If you had nothing else with which to occupy your mind you'd grieve over the shape of your feet." He turned to Havarre. "You've had little enough to say. Have you no opinion about this?"

Immediately leery, Havarre replied, "If we stay put while we look around, I think we should be careful."

"Have you any reason to suppose that I intend to be rash?"

"No, no, not at all."

"Then why the advice?"

"You asked my opinion and I gave it. I don't trust these Terrans."

"Who does?" said Lagasta. He made a gesture indicative of ending the subject. "All right. We'll allow

the pilots a good, long sleep. After their brains have been thoroughly rested we'll send them out again. Our next step will depend upon whether more Terrans have been found and, if so, whether they have been discovered in strength."

"What do you mean by strength?" Kaznitz asked.

"Any number in possession of a ship or a long-range transmitter. Or any number too large for us to remove without leaving evidence of it."

"Have it your own way," said Kaznitz.

"I intend to," Lagasta assured.

The first boat returned with the same news as before, namely, no Terrans, no sign that a Terran had ever been within a million miles of the planet. Eight more boats came back at varying intervals and made identical reports vouching for a total lack of Terrans in their respective sectors. One pilot added that he became so convinced that Yaksid must have suffered a delusion that on his return he had gone out of his way to cut through that worthy's sector. Yes, he had seen the stone house with his own two eyes. No, he had not observed any sign of life around the place.

Yaksid appeared last.

"I went straight to the house and

circled it as before. Again a Terran came out and watched me. He also waved to me."

"It was the same Terran?" demanded Lagasta.

"He may have been. I don't know. One cannot study a face on the ground when flying a scout boat. Besides, all Terrans look alike to me. I can't tell one from another."

"Well, what happened after that?"

"I made low-level inspection of a surrounding area ten times larger than last time. In fact I overlapped by quite a piece the search lines of boats seven and eight. There was not another house or even a tent, much less an encampment."

Lagasta brooded over this information, eventually said, "The occupants of that house are by themselves in a strange world. That's a form of loneliness sufficiently appalling to guarantee that they'd rush out headlong for a look at a ship. If six, ten or twelve Terrans were crammed in that hut, they'd get stuck in the doorway in their haste to see Yaksid's boat. But only one showed himself the first time. Only one showed himself the second time. I think there's not more than one in that hut."

"So do I," offered Yaksid.

Kaznitz said to Yaksid, "He waved to you on both occasions. Did he appear to be waving for help?"

"No."

"Does it matter?" Lagasta asked.

"If he were a marooned survivor, one would expect him to jump at a chance of rescue."

"Not at our hands. He could see at a glance that the scout boat was not a Terran one. He'd take no chance with another species."

"Then why did he show himself? Why didn't he hide and leave us in sweet ignorance of his existence?"

"Because he couldn't conceal the hut," replied Lagasta, showing lack of patience.

"He wouldn't need to," Kaznitz persisted. "When you seek cover from a prospective enemy you don't take your house with you."

"Kaznitz, there are times when you irritate me beyond measure. Just what have you got on your mind?"

"Look, you believe that in that building is the only Terran upon this world. Right?"

"Right!"

"He can have got here in only one of two ways, namely, by accident or by design. Right?"

"Right!"

"If he doesn't want help, he's not here by accident. He's here by design. Right?"

Lagasta evaded the point. "I don't care if he's here by a miracle. It will take more than the presence of one lousy alien to make me give up a new world."

"I suspect there *is* more—more to it than meets the eye."

"That may be so. I am no fool, Kaznitz. Your suspicion of Terrans is no greater than mine. But I refuse to flee at first sight of one of them."

"Then what do you think we should do?"

"There are eight of us with enough

knowledge of Terran gabble to limp through a conversation. We should have a talk with this character. If he's here for a purpose, we must discover what it is."

"And afterward?"

"It may prove expedient to make him disappear. A deplorable necessity. But, as you never cease to remind me, Kaznitz, life is full of deplorable things. And, like everyone else, this Terran must expect to have an unlucky day sooner or later. When he and his hut have vanished from the face of creation we can defy anyone to prove that we were not here first."

"Somehow I don't think it's going to be as easy as that," opined Kaznitz.

"You wouldn't. You were alarmed at birth and the feeling has never worn off."

Havarre put in uneasily, "As I said before, we should be very careful. But I see no harm in having a talk with this Terran. Neither his authorities nor ours can object to that. Nothing in our orders forbids us to speak."

"Thanks be to the suns for at least one bit of half-hearted support," said Lagasta piously. "We'll move the ship to where this stone hut is located. No need to load the scout boats on board. Let them fly with us. They'll help to make us look more imposing."

"Want me to order the crew to make ready right now?" inquired Havarre.

"Yes, you do that. We'll invite our prospective victim to dinner. Some of his kind are said to be fond of strong drink. We'll feed him plenty, sufficient to loosen his tongue. If he talks enough, he may save his neck. If he talks too much, he may get his throat cut. It all depends. We'll see."

"Bet you ten days' pay you're wasting your time," offered Kaznitz.

"Taken," agreed Lagasta with alacrity. "It will be a pleasant change to have you go moody over your losses and my gains."

As the ship came down Lagasta stood by a port and studied the rising house. "Neat and solid. He could possibly have built it himself. The door and windows could have come from a dismantled lifeboat. The rock slabs are local material and what looks like cement is probably hard mud."

"Still clinging to the theory of a lone survivor from some cosmic wreck?" asked Kaznitz.

"It's a likely explanation of why there is one Terran and only one." Lagasta glanced at the other. "Can you offer a better solution?"

"Yes. They've isolated a plague carrier."

*"What?"*

"Could be. What do we know of their diseases?"

"Kaznitz, why do you persist in producing the most unpleasant ideas?"

"Somebody has to consider the possibilities. When one knows almost nothing about another species what can one do but speculate? The only available substitutes for facts are guesses."

"They don't have to be repulsive guesses."

"They do—if your main purpose is to take no risks."

"If this character is bulging with alien bacteria to which we have no resistance, he could wipe out the lot of us without straining a muscle."

"That could happen," agreed Kaznitz cheerfully.

"Look here, Kaznitz, your morbid mind has put us in a fix. Therefore it is for you to get us out of it."

"How?"

"I am appointing you to go to that house and find out why that Terran is here. It's your job to make sure that he's safe and sanitary before we allow him aboard."

"He may refuse to come aboard. It could seem much like walking into a trap."

"If he won't come to us, we'll go to him. All you need do, Kaznitz, is first make sure that he is not loaded with death and corruption. I've no wish to expire as the result of breathing in bad company."

At that point the ship grounded with crunching sounds under the keel. The ten scout boats circled overhead, came down one by one and positioned themselves in a neat row. Lagasta had another look at the house now two hundred yards away. The alien occupant could be seen standing in the doorway gazing at the arrivals but his face was hidden in deep shadow.

"On your way, Kaznitz."

With a shrug of resignation, Kaznitz got going. While many pairs of eyes looked on he went down the gangway, trudged to the house, halted at the door. For a short while he and the Terran chatted. Then they went inside, remained for twenty minutes before they reappeared. They headed for the ship. Lagasta met them at the mid air lock.

"This," introduced Kaznitz, "is Leonard Nash. He says we should call him Len."

"Glad to know you," responded Lagasta with false cordiality. "It's all too seldom we meet your kind." He studied the Terran carefully. The fellow was short, broad and swarthy with restless eyes that seemed to be trying to look six ways at once. There was something peculiar about him that Lagasta could not place; a vague, indefinable air of being more different than was warranted even in an alien. Lagasta went on, "I don't think I've spoken to more than twenty Terrans in all my life. And then only very briefly."

"Is that so?" said Len.

"Yes," Lagasta assured.

"Too bad," said Len. His eyes flickered around. "Where do we eat?"

Slightly disconcerted, Lagasta took the lead. "This way to the officers' mess. We are honored to have you as our guest."

"That's nice," responded Len, following.

At the table Lagasta seated the newcomer on his right, said to Havarre, "You speak some Terran so you sit on his other side." Then surreptitiously to Kaznitz, "You sit on my left—I want a word with you soon."

The ship's officers filed in, took

their places. Lagasta made formal introductions while Len favored each in turn with a blank stare and a curt nod. Dinner was served. The Terran tasted the first dish with suspicion, pulled a face and pushed it away. The next course was much to his liking and he started scooping it up with single-minded concentration. He was an unashamed guzzle-guts and didn't care who knew it.

Lagasta grabbed the opportunity to lean sidewise and question Kaznitz in his own language. "You sure he's not full of disease?"

"Yes."

"How d'you know?"

"Because he's expecting to be picked up and taken home before long. In fact he has recorded the date of his return."

"Ah! So the Terrans *do* know he's here?" Lagasta suppressed a scowl.

"Yes. They dumped him here in the first place."

"Alone?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"He doesn't know."

After digesting this information, Lagasta growled, "It doesn't make sense. I think he's lying."

"Could be," said Kaznitz.

Stewards brought bottles. Len's reaction to drink was the same as that to food: a wary and suspicious sip followed by lip-smacking approval and greedy swallowing. Whenever a new course was brought in his active eyes examined all the other plates as if to check that they didn't hold more than was on his own. Frequently he signed for his glass to be filled. His general manner was that of one cashing in on a free feed. Perhaps, thought Lagasta, it was excusable in one who'd had an entire world to himself and may have gone hungry most of the time. All the same, he, Lagasta, didn't like Terrans and liked this one even less.

With the long meal over and the officers gone, Lagasta, Kaznitz and Havarre settled down to more drinking and an informative conversation with their guest. By this time Len was feeling good, sprawling in his chair, a full glass in one hand, his face flushed with an inward glow. Obviously he was mellow and in the mood to talk.

Lagasta began politely with, "Company, even strange company, must be more than welcome to one leading such a lonely life as yours."

"Sure is," said Len. "There've been times when I've talked to myself for hours. Too much of that can send a fellow off his head." He took an appreciative swig from the glass. "Thank God I've a date marked on the wall."

"You mean you're here for a limited time?"

"I was dumped for four years maximum. Most of it's now behind me. I've only seven more months to go—then it's home, sweet home."

Seeing no satisfactory way of getting to the point obliquely, Lagasta decided to approach it on the straight. "How did you come to be put here in the first place?"

"Well, it was like this: I was a three-time loser and—"

"A what?"

"I'd done two stretches in prison when I qualified for a third. The judge gave me fifteen to twenty years, that being mandatory. So I was slung into the jug." He sipped his drink reminiscently. "Hadn't been there a week when I was called to the warden's office. Two fellows there waiting for me. Don't know who they were. Said to me, 'We've been taking a look at you. You're in good physical condition. You're also in a jam and plenty young enough to have regrets. How'd you like to do four years in solitary?' "

"Go on," urged Lagasta, managing to understand about three-quarters of it.

"Naturally, I asked who was crazy. I'd been plastered with fifteen to twenty and that was suffering enough. So they said they weren't trying to pin something more on me. They didn't mean four years in addition to —they meant four instead of. If I wanted it I could have it and, what's more, I'd come out with a clean sheet."

"You accepted?"

"After crawling all over them with a magnifying glass looking for the gag. There had to be one somewhere. The law doesn't suddenly ease up and go soft without good reason."

"What did they tell you?"

"Wanted me to take a ride in a spaceship. Said it might plant me on an empty world. They weren't sure about that but thought it likely. Said if I did get dumped all I had to do was sit tight for four years and behave myself. At the end of that time I'd be picked up and brought home and my prison records would be destroyed."

"So you're a criminal?"

"Was once. Not now. Officially I'm a solid citizen. Or soon will be."

Kaznitz put in with mild interest, "Do you intend to remain a solid citizen after your return?"

Giving a short laugh, Len said, "Depends."

Staring at him as if seeing him for the first time, Lagasta remarked, "If it were possible to make a person acquire respect for society by depriving him of the company of his fellows, it could be done in jail. There would be no need to go to the enormous trouble and expense of putting him on some faraway uninhabited planet. So there must be some motive other than the reformation of a criminal. There must be an obscure but worthwhile purpose in placing you here."

"Search me," said Len indifferently. "So long as I get the benefit, why should I care?"

"You say you've been here about three and a half Earth-years?"

"Correct."

"And nobody has visited you in all that time?"

"Not a soul," declared Len. "Yours are the first voices I've heard."

"Then," persisted Lagasta, "how have you managed to live?"

"No trouble at all. When the ship landed the crew prospected for water. After they'd found it they put down

a bore and built the shack over it. They fixed a small atomic engine in the basement; it pumps water, heats it, warms and lights the place. They also swamped me with food, books, games, tape-recordings and whatever. I've got all the comforts of the Ritz, or most of them."

"Then they left you to do nothing for four years?"

"That's right. Just eat, sleep, amuse myself." Then he added by way of afterthought, "And keep watch."

"Ah!" Lagasta's long ears twitched as he pounced on that remark. "Keep watch for what?"

"Anyone coming here."

Leaning back in his seat, Lagasta eyed the other with ill-concealed contempt. Under clever questioning and the influence of drink the fellow's evasions had been driven from the sublime to the ridiculous. Persistent liars usually gave themselves away by not knowing when to stop.

"Quite a job," commented Lagasta, dangerously oily, "keeping watch over an entire planet."

"Didn't give me any gray hairs," assured Len. He exhibited an empty glass and Havarre promptly filled it for him.

"In fact," Lagasta went on, "seeing that you have to eat and sleep, it would be a major task merely to keep watch on the relatively tiny area within your own horizon."

"Sure would," Len agreed.

"Then how is it possible for one man to stand guard over a planet?"

"I asked them about that. I said, 'Hey, d'you chumps think I'm clairvoyant?' "

"And what was their reply?"

"They said, 'Don't worry your head, boy. If anyone lands north pole or south pole, your side or the other side, by day or by night, you don't have to go looking for them. *They'll come looking for you!*' " A smirk, lopsided and peculiarly irritating, came into Len's face. "Seems they were dead right, eh?"

Lagasta's temporary sensation of impending triumph faded away and was replaced by vague alarm. He slid a glance at Kaznitz and Havarre, found their expressions studiously blank.

"One can hardly describe it as keeping watch if one waits for people to knock on the door," he suggested.

"Oh, there was more to it than that," informed Len. "When they knock, I press the button."

"What button?"

"The one in the wall. Got a blue lens above it. If anyone comes, I press the button and make sure the blue lens lights up. If the lens fails to shine, it shows I've not pressed hard enough. I ram the button deep enough to get the blue light. That's all there is to it."

"In view of our arrival I presume the button has been pressed?" asked Lagasta.

"Yeah, couple of days ago. Something came snoring around the roof. I looked out the window, saw your bubble boat, recognized the pilot as non-Terran. So I did my chore with the button. Then I went outside and

waved to him. Fat lot of notice he took. Did he think I was thumbing a lift or something?"

Ignoring that question, Lagasta said, "What happens when the button is pressed?"

"Darned if I know. They didn't bother to tell me and I didn't bother to ask. What's it to me, anyway?"

"There is no antenna on your roof," Lagasta pointed out.

"Should there be?" Len held his drink up to the light and studied it with approval. "Say, this stuff varies quite a lot. We're on a bottle much better than the last one."

"For the button to transmit a signal there'd have to be an antenna."

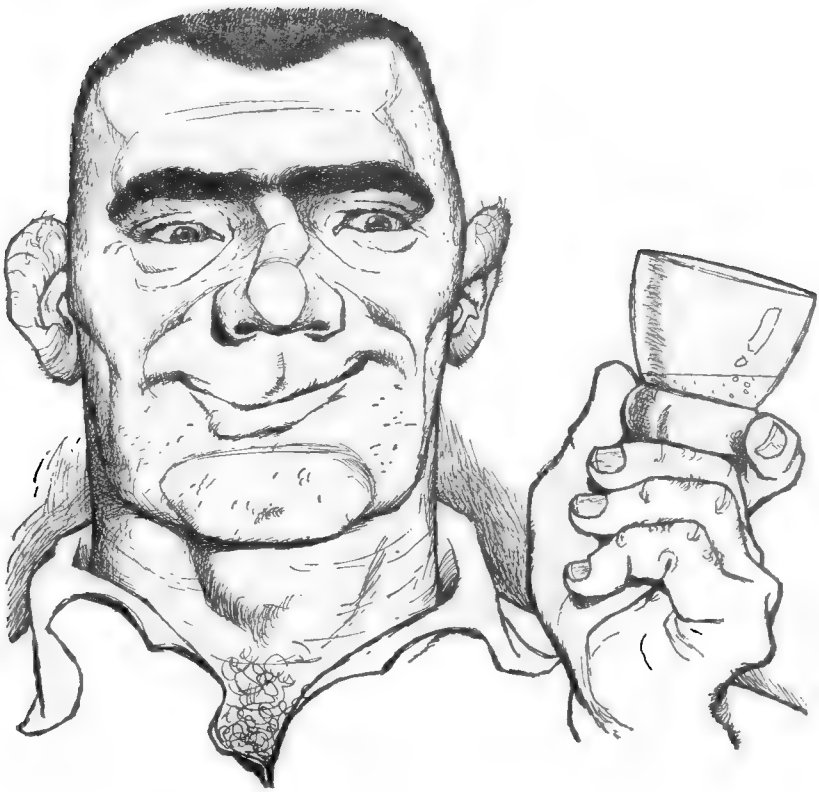
"I'll take your word for it."

"Therefore," Lagasta baited, "it does not transmit a signal. It does something else."

"I told you what it does—it makes the blue lens light up."

"What good does that do?"

"Does me lots of good. Earns me



a remission. I get out in four instead of fifteen to twenty." Strumming an invisible guitar, Len sang a discordant line about his little gray cell in the west. Then he struggled to his feet and teetered slightly. "Great stuff that varnish of yours. The longer you hold it the stronger it works. Either I go now under my own steam or I stay another hour and you carry me home."

The three stood up and Lagasta said, "Perhaps you'd like to take a bottle with you. After we've gone you can drink a toast to absent friends."

Len clutched it gratefully. "Friends is right. You've made my life. Don't know what I'd do without you. So far as I'm concerned you're welcome to stick around for keeps." Rather unsteadily he followed Kaznitz out, turned in the doorway and added, "Remember asking 'em, 'Where am I if some outlandish bunch want to play rough with me?' And they said, 'They won't—because there'll be no dividends in it.'" He put on the same smirk as before but it was more distorted by drink. "Real prophets, those guys. Hit the nail smack-bang on the head every time."

He went, nursing his bottle. Lagasta flopped into a chair and stared at the wall. So did Havarre. Neither stirred until Kaznitz came back.

Lagasta said viciously, "I'd lop off his fool head without the slightest compunction if it weren't for that button business."

"And that may be a lie," offered Havarre.

"It isn't," Kaznitz contradicted. "He told the truth. I saw the button and the lens for myself. I also heard the faint whine of a power plant somewhere in the foundations." He mused a moment, went on, "As for the lack of an antenna, all we know is that in similar circumstances we'd need one. But do they? We can't assume that in all respects their science is identical with our own."

"Logic's the same everywhere, though," Lagasta gave back. "So let's try and look at this logically. It's obvious that this Len character is no intellectual. I think it's safe to accept that he is what he purports to be, namely, a criminal, an antisocial type of less than average intelligence. That raises three questions. Firstly, why have the Terrans put only one man on this planet instead of a proper garrison? Secondly, why did they choose a person of poor mentality? Thirdly, why did they select a criminal?"

"For the first, I have no idea," responded Kaznitz. "But I can give a guess at the others."

"Well?"

"They used someone none too bright because it is impossible to coax, drug, hypnotize, torture or otherwise extract valuable information from an empty head. The Terrans don't know what we've got but one thing they do know: no power in creation can force out of a skull anything that isn't in it in the first place."

"I'll give you that," Lagasta conceded.

"As for picking on a criminal

rather than any ordinary dope, seems to me that such a person could be given a very strong inducement to follow instructions to the letter. He'd be meticulous about pressing a button because he had everything to gain and nothing to lose."

"All right," said Lagasta, accepting this reasoning without argument. "Now let's consider the button itself. One thing is certain: it wasn't installed for nothing. Therefore it was fixed up for something. It has a purpose that makes sense even if it's alien sense. The mere pressing of it would be meaningless unless it produced a result of some kind. What's your guess on that?"

Havarre interjected, "The only possible conclusion is that it sounds an alarm somehow, somewhere."

"That's what I think," Kaznitz supported.

"Me, too," said Lagasta. "But it does more than just that. By sending the alarm it vouches for the fact that this watchman Len was still alive and in possession of his wits when we landed. And if we put him down a deep hole it will also vouch for the fact that he disappeared immediately after our arrival. Therefore it may provide proof of claim-jumping should such proof be necessary." He breathed deeply and angrily, finished, "It's highly likely that a fast Terran squadron is already bulleting this way. How soon it gets here depends upon how near its base happens to be."

"Doesn't matter if they catch us sitting on their world," Kaznitz pointed out. "We've done nothing wrong. We've shown hospitality to their sentinel and we've made no claim to the planet."

"I *want* to claim the planet," shouted Lagasta. "How'm I going to to do it *now?*"

"You can't," said Kaznitz. "It's far too risky."

"It'd be asking for trouble in very large lumps," opined Havarre. "I know what I'd do if it were left to me."

"You'd do what?"

"I'd beat it at top speed. With luck we might get to the next new world an hour ahead of the Terrans. If we do we'll be more than glad that we didn't waste that hour on this world."

"I hate giving up a discovery," Lagasta declared.

"I hate giving up two of them in rapid succession," retorted Havarre with considerable point.

Lagasta growled, "You win. Order the crew to bring the scout boats aboard and prepare for take-off." He watched Havarre hasten out, turned to Kaznitz and rasped, "Curse them!"

"Who? The crew?"

"No, the Terrans." Then he stamped a couple of times around the cabin and added, "Snitgobbers!"

The vessel that swooped from the sky and made a descending curve toward the rock house was not a warship. It was pencil-thin, ultra-fast, had a small crew and was known as a courier boat. Landing

lightly and easily, it put forth a gangway.

Two technicians emerged and hurried to the house, intent on checking the atomic engine and the power circuits. The relief watchman appeared, scuffed grass with his feet, stared curiously around. He was built like a bear, had an underslung jaw, small, sunken eyes. His arms were thick, hairy and lavishly tattooed.

Moving fast, the crew manhandled crates and cartons out of the ship and into the house. The bulkiest item consisted of forty thousand cigarettes in air-tight cans. The beneficiary of this forethought, a thug able to spell simple words, was a heavy smoker.

Leonard Nash went on board the ship, gave his successor a sardonic smirk in passing. The crew finished their task. The technicians returned. Leaning from the air-lock door, an officer bawled final injunctions at the lone spectator.

"Remember, you *must* press until the blue lens lights up. Keep away from the local gin-traps and girlie shows—they'll ruin your constitution. See you in four years."

The metal disk clanged shut and screwed itself inward. With a boom the ship went up while the man with a world to himself became a midget, a dot, nothing.

Navigator Reece sat in the fore cabin gazing meditatively at the star-field when Copilot McKechnie arrived to keep him company. Dumping himself in a pneumatic chair, McKechnie stretched out long legs.

"Been gabbing with that bum we picked up. He's not delirious with happiness. Got as much emotion as a lump of rock. And as many brains. It's a safe bet his clean sheet means nothing whatever; he won't be back a year before the cops are after him again."

"Did he have any trouble on that last world?"

"None at all. Says a bunch of weirdies landed six or seven months ago. They pushed a hunk of brotherly love at him and then scooted. He says they seemed to be in a hurry."

"Probably had a nice grab in prospect somewhere."

"Or perhaps we've got them on the run. Maybe they've discovered at long last that we're outgrabbing them in the ratio of seven to one. Those Antareans are still staking claims by the old method. Ship finds a planet, beams the news home, sits tight on the claim until a garrison arrives. That might take five, ten or twenty years, during which time the ship is out of commission. Meanwhile, a ship of ours discovers A, dumps one man, pushes on to B, dumps another man, and with any luck at all has nailed down C and D by the time we've transported a garrison to A. The time problem is a tough one and the only way to cope is to hustle."

"Dead right," agreed Reece. "It's bound to dawn on them sooner or later. It's a wonder they didn't knock that fellow on the head."

"They wouldn't do that, seeing he'd pressed the button," McKechnie observed.

"Button? What button?"

"There's a button in that house. Pressing it switches on a blue light."

"Is that so?" said Reece. "And what else?"

"Nothing else. Just that. A blue light."

Reece frowned heavily to himself while he thought it over. "I don't get it."

"Neither do unwanted visitors. That's why they scoot."

"I still don't get it."

"See here, to get into space a species must have a high standard of intelligence. Agreed?"

"Yes."

"Unlike lunatics, the intelligent are predictable in that they can be depended upon always to do the intelligent thing. They never, never, never do things that are pointless and mean nothing. Therefore a button and a blue light must have purpose, intelligent purpose."

"You mean we're kidding the Antareans with a phony setup, a rigmarole that is fundamentally stupid?"

"No, boy, not at all. We've fooling them by exploiting a way of thinking that you are demonstrating right now."

"Me?" Reece was indignant.

"Don't get mad about it. The outlook is natural enough. You're a spaceman in the space age. Therefore you have a great reverence for physics, astronautics and everything else that created the space age. You're so full of respect for the cogent sciences that you're apt to forget something."

"Forget what?"

McKechnie said, "That psychology is also a science."

THE END

# IN TIMES TO COME

Next month, Mr. Randall Garrett leads off with a novelette that will, we —Randy and I—hope will mislead you nicely to the correct conclusion. The above may sound like a contradiction in terms, but it is, sometimes, necessary to mislead someone to get him to a correct conclusion that is contrary to previously reached "known facts." This one is titled "The Destroyers"; it has nothing to do with the Golden Empire. Have fun with it; we did!

Also upcoming, George O. Smith's story "The Big Fix" It has to do with the problems of a professional crook when the nasty old unfair police use telepaths as routine crime-spotters. So you think maybe that telepathy would solve all those problems, eh . . . ?

THE EDITOR.

# A FILBERT IS A NUT

## BY RICK RAPHAEL

***That the gentleman in question was a nut was beyond question. He was an institutionalized psychotic. He was nutty enough to think he could make an atom bomb out of modeling clay!***

Illustrated by Freas

MISS Abercrombie, the manual therapist patted the old man on the shoulder. "You're doing just fine, Mr. Lieberman. Show it to me when you have finished."

The oldster in the stained convalescent suit gave her a quick, shy smile and went back to his aimless smearing in the finger paints.

Miss Abercrombie smoothed her smock down over trim hips and surveyed the other patients working at the long tables in the hospital's arts and crafts shop. Two muscular and bored attendants in spotless whites, lounged beside the locked door and chatted idly about the Dodgers' prospects for the pennant.

Through the barred windows of the workshop, rolling green hills were seen, their tree-studded flanks making a pleasant setting for the mental institution. The crafts building was a good mile away from the main buildings of the hospital and the hills blocked the view of the austere complex of buildings that housed the main wards.

The therapist strolled down the line of tables, pausing to give a word of advice here, and a suggestion there.

She stopped behind a frowning, intense patient, rapidly shaping blobs of clay into odd-sized strips and forms. As he finished each piece, he carefully placed it into a hollow shell hemisphere of clay.

"And what are we making today, Mr. Funston?" Miss Abercrombie asked.

The flying fingers continued to whip out the bits of shaped clay as the patient ignored the question. He hunched closer to his table as if to draw away from the woman.

"We mustn't be antisocial, Mr. Funston," Miss Abercrombie said lightly, but firmly. "You've been coming along famously and you must remember to answer when someone talks to you. Now what are you making? It looks very complicated." She stared professionally at the maze of clay parts.

Thaddeus Funston continued to mold the clay bits and put them in place.

Without looking up from his bench he muttered a reply.

"Atom bomb."

A puzzled look crossed the therapist's face. "Pardon me, Mr. Funston. I thought you said an 'atom bomb.' "

"Did," Funston murmured.

Safely behind the patient's back, Miss Abercrombie smiled ever so slightly. "Why that's very good, Mr. Funston. That shows real creative thought. I'm very pleased."

She patted him on the shoulder and moved down the line of patients.

A few minutes later, one of the attendants glanced at his watch, stood up and stretched.

"All right, fellows," he called out, "time to go back. Put up your things."

There was a rustle of paint boxes and papers being shuffled and chairs being moved back. A tall, blond patient with a flowing mustache, put one more dab of paint on his canvas and stood back to survey the meaningless smears. He sighed happily and laid down his palette.

At the clay table, Funston feverishly fabricated the last odd-shaped bit of clay and slapped it into place. With a furtive glance around him, he clapped the other half of the clay sphere over the filled hemisphere and then stood up. The patients lined up

at the door, waiting for the walk back across the green hills to the main hospital. The attendants made a quick count and then unlocked the door. The group shuffled out into the warm, afternoon sunlight and the door closed behind them.

Miss Abercrombie gazed around the cluttered room and picked up her chart book of patient progress. Moving slowly down the line of benches, she made short, precise notes on the day's work accomplished by each patient.

At the clay table, she carefully lifted the top half of the clay ball and stared thoughtfully at the jumbled maze of clay strips laced through the lower hemisphere. She placed the lid back in place and jotted lengthily in her chart book.

When she had completed her rounds, she slipped out of the smock, tucked the chart book under her arm and left the crafts building for the day.

The late afternoon sun felt warm and comfortable as she walked the mile to the main administration building where her car was parked.

As she drove out of the hospital grounds, Thaddeus Funston stood at the barred window of his locked ward and stared vacantly over the hills towards the craft shop. He stood there unmoving until a ward attendant came and took his arm an hour later to lead him off to the patients' mess hall.

The sun set, darkness fell over the stilled hospital grounds and the ward lights winked out at nine o'clock, leaving just a single light burning in each ward office. A quiet wind sighed over the still-warm hills.

At 3:01 a.m., Thaddeus Funston stirred in his sleep and awakened. He sat up in bed and looked around the dark ward. The quiet breathing and occasional snores of thirty other sleeping patients filled the room. Funston turned to the window and stared out across the black hills that sheltered the deserted crafts building.

He gave a quick cry, shut his eyes and clapped his hands over his face.

The brilliance of a hundred suns glared in the night and threw stark shadows on the walls of the suddenly-illuminated ward.

An instant later, the shattering roar and blast of the explosion struck the hospital buildings in a wave of force and the bursting crash of a thousand windows was lost in the fury of the explosion and the wild screams of the frightened and demented patients.

It was over in an instant, and a stunned moment later, recessed ceiling lights began flashing on throughout the big institution.

Beyond the again-silent hills, a great pillar of smoke, topped by a small mushroom-shaped cloud, rose above the gaping hole that had been the arts and crafts building.

Thaddeus Funston took his hands from his face and lay back in his bed with a small, secret smile on his lips. Attendants and nurses scurried through the hospital, seeing how many had been injured in the explosion.

None had. The hills had absorbed most of the shock and apart from a welter of broken glass, the damage had been surprisingly slight.

The roar and flash of the explosion had lighted and rocked the surrounding countryside. Soon firemen and civil defense disaster units from a half-dozen neighboring communities had gathered at the still-smoking hole that marked the site of the vanished crafts building.

Within fifteen minutes, the disaster-trained crews had detected heavy radiation emanating from the crater and there was a scurry of men and equipment back to a safe distance, a few hundred yards away.

At 5:30 a.m., a plane landed at a nearby airfield and a platoon of Atomic Energy Commission experts, military intelligence men, four FBI agents and an Army full colonel disembarked.

At 5:45 a.m. a cordon was thrown around both the hospital and the blast crater.

In Ward 4-C, Thaddeus Funston slept peacefully and happily.

"It's impossible and unbelievable," Colonel Thomas Thurgood said for the fifteenth time, later that morning, as he looked around the group of experts gathered in the tent erected on the hill overlooking the crater. "How can an atom bomb go off in a nut house?"

"It apparently was a very small bomb, colonel," one of the haggard AEC men offered timidly. "Not over three kilotons."

"I don't care if it was the size of a peanut," Thurgood screamed. "How did it get here?"

A military intelligence agent spoke up. "If we knew, sir, we wouldn't be standing around here. We don't know, but the fact remains that it WAS an atomic explosion."

Thurgood turned wearily to the small, white-haired man at his side.

"Let's go over it once more, Dr. Crane. Are you sure you knew everything that was in that building?" Thurgood swept his hand in the general direction of the blast crater.

"Colonel, I've told you a dozen times," the hospital administrator said with exasperation, "this was our manual therapy room. We gave our patients art work. It was a means of getting out of their systems, through the use of their hands, some of the frustrations and problems that led them to this hospital. They worked with oil and water paints and clay. If you can make an atomic bomb from vermillion pigments, then Madame Curie was a misguided scrubwoman."

"All I know is that you say this was a crafts building. O.K. So it was," Thurgood sighed. "I also know that an atomic explosion at 3:02 this morning blew it to hell and gone.

"And I've got to find out how it happened."

Thurgood slumped into a field chair and gazed tiredly up at the little doctor.

"Where's that girl you said was in charge of this place?"

"We've already called for Miss

Abercrombie and she's on her way here now," the doctor snapped.

Outside the tent, a small army of military men and AEC technicians moved around the perimeter of the crater, scintillators in hand, examining every tiny scrap that might have been a part of the building at one time.

A jeep raced down the road from the hospital and drew up in front of the tent. An armed MP helped Miss Abercrombie from the vehicle.

She walked to the edge of the hill and looked down with a stunned expression.

"He did make an atom bomb," she cried.

Colonel Thurgood, who had snapped from his chair at her words, leaped forward to catch her as she collapsed in a faint.

At 4:00 p.m., the argument was still raging in the long, narrow staff room of the hospital administration building.

Colonel Thurgood, looking more like a patient every minute, sat on the edge of his chair at the head of a long table and pounded with his fist on the wooden surface, making Miss Abercrombie's chart book bounce with every beat.

"It's ridiculous," Thurgood roared. "We'll all be the laughingstocks of the world if this ever gets out. An atomic bomb made out of clay. You are all nuts. You're in the right place, but count me out."

At his left, Miss Abercrombie cringed deeper into her chair at the broadside. Down both sides of the long table, psychiatrists, physicists, strategists and radiologists sat in various stages of nerve-shattered weariness.

"Miss Abercrombie," one of the physicists spoke up gently, "you say that after the patients had departed the building, you looked again at Funston's work?"

The therapist nodded unhappily.

"And you say that, to the best of your knowledge," the physicist continued, "there was nothing inside the ball but other pieces of clay."

"I'm positive that's all there was in it," Miss Abercrombie cried.

There was a renewed buzz of conversation at the table and the senior AEC man present got heads together with the senior intelligence man. They conferred briefly and then the intelligence officer spoke.

"That seems to settle it, colonel. We've got to give this Funston another chance to repeat his bomb. But this time under our supervision."

Thurgood leaped to his feet, his face purpling.

"Are you crazy?" he screamed. "You want to get us all thrown into this filbert factory? Do you know what the newspapers would do to us if they ever got wind of the fact, that for one, tiny fraction of a second, anyone of us here entertained the notion that a paranoidal idiot with the IQ of an ape could make an atomic bomb out of kid's modeling clay?

"They'd crucify us, that's what they'd do!"

At 8:30 that night, Thaddeus Funston, swathed in an Army officer's greatcoat that concealed the strait jacket binding him and with an officer's cap jammed far down over his face, was hustled out of a small side door of the hospital and into a waiting staff car. A few minutes later, the car pulled into the flying field at the nearby community and drove directly to the military transport plane that stood at the end of the runway with propellers turning.

Two military policemen and a brace of staff psychiatrists sworn to secrecy under the National Atomic Secrets Act, bundled Thaddeus aboard the plane. They plopped him into a seat directly in front of Miss Abercrombie and with a roar, the plane raced down the runway and into the night skies.

The plane landed the next morning at the AEC's atomic testing grounds in the Nevada desert and two hours later, in a small hot, wooden shack miles up the barren desert wastelands, a cluster of scientists and military men huddled around a small wooden table.

There was nothing on the table but a bowl of water and a great lump of modeling clay. While the psychiatrists were taking the strait jacket off Thaddeus in the staff car outside, Colonel Thurgood spoke to the weary Miss Abercrombie.

"Now you're positive this is just about the same amount and the same kind of clay he used before?"

"I brought it along from the same batch we had in the store room at the hospital," she replied, "and it's the same amount."

Thurgood signaled to the doctors and they entered the shack with Thaddeus Funston between them. The colonel nudged Miss Abercrombie.

She smiled at Funston.

"Now isn't this nice, Mr. Funston," she said. "These nice men have brought us way out here just to see you make another atom bomb like the one you made for me yesterday."

A flicker of interest lightened Thaddeus' face. He looked around the shack and then spotted the clay on the table. Without hesitation, he walked to the table and sat down. His fingers began working the damp clay, making first the hollow, half-round shell while the nation's top atomic scientists watched in fascination.

His busy fingers flew through the clay, shaping odd, flat bits and clay parts that were dropped almost aimlessly into the open hemisphere in front of him.

Miss Abercrombie stood at his shoulder as Thaddeus hunched over the table just as he had done the previous day. From time to time she glanced at her watch. The maze of clay strips grew and as Funston finished shaping the other half hemisphere of clay, she broke the tense silence.

"Time to go back now, Mr. Funston. You can work some more tomorrow." She looked at the men and nodded her head.

The two psychiatrists went to

Thaddeus' side as he put the upper lid of clay carefully in place. Funston stood up and the doctors escorted him from the shack.

There was a moment of hushed silence and then pandemonium burst. The experts converged on the clay ball, instruments blossoming from nowhere and cameras clicking.

For two hours they studied and gently probed the mass of child's clay and photographed it from every angle.

Then they left for the concrete observatory bunker, several miles down range where Thaddeus and the psychiatrists waited inside a ring of stony-faced military policemen.

"I told you this whole thing was asinine," Thurgood snarled as the scientific teams trooped into the bunker.

Thaddeus Funston stared out over the heads of the MPs through the open door, looking uprange over the heat-shimmering desert. He gave a sudden cry, shut his eyes and clapped his hands over his face.

A brilliance a hundred times brighter than the glaring Nevada sun lit the dim interior of the bunker and the pneumatically-operated door slammed shut just before the wave of the blast hit the structure.

Six hours and a jet plane trip later, Thaddeus, once again in his strait jacket, sat between his armed escorts in a small room in the Pentagon. Through the window he could see the hurried bustle of traffic over the Potomac and beyond, the domed roof of the Capitol.

In the conference room next door, the joint chiefs of staff were closeted with a gray-faced and bone-weary Colonel Thurgood and his baker's dozen of AEC brains. Scraps of the hot and scornful talk drifted across a half-opened transom into the room where Thaddeus Funston sat in a neatly-tied bundle.

In the conference room, a red-faced, four-star general cast a chilling glance at the rumpled figure of Colonel Thurgood.

"I've listened to some silly stories in my life, colonel," the general said coldly, "but this takes the cake. You come in here with an insane asylum inmate in a strait jacket and you have the colossal gall to sit there and tell me that this poor soul has made not one, but two atomic devices out of modeling clay and then has detonated them."

The general paused.

"Why don't you just tell me, colonel, that he can also make spaceships out of sponge rubber?" the general added bitingly.

In the next room, Thaddeus Funston stared out over the sweeping panorama of the Washington landscape. He stared hard.

In the distance, a white cloud began billowing up from the base of the Washington Monument, and with an ear-shattering, glass-splintering roar, the great shaft rose majestically from its base and vanished into space on a tail of flame.

THE END

# THE UNNECESSARY MAN

## BY RANDALL GARRETT

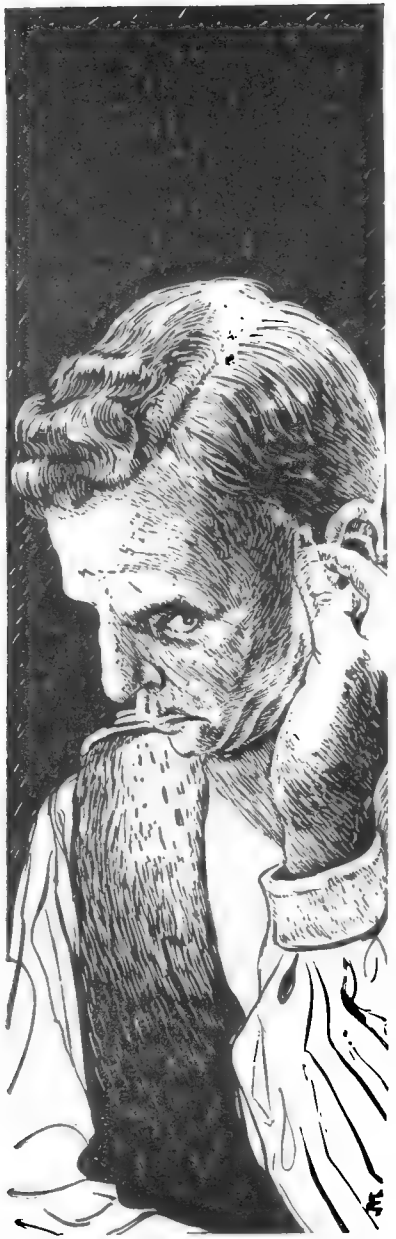
***Sometimes an organizational setup grows, sets its ways, and becomes so traditional that once-necessary jobs become unnecessary. But it is sometimes quite hard to spot just which man is the unnecessary one. In this case . . . not the one you think!***

Illustrated by Martinez

*"I recall," said the Businessman, "that William Wrigley, Junior, once said:* 'When two men in a business always agree, one of them is unnecessary.' *How true that is."*

*The Philosopher cast his eyes toward Heaven. "O God! The Mercantile Mind!" He looked back at the Businessman. "When two men in a business always agree, one of them will come in handy as a scapegoat."*

*THE IDLE WORSHIPERS*
by R. Phillip Dachboden



LORD Barrick Sorban, Colonel, H.I.M.O.G., Ret., sipped gently at his drink and looked mildly at the sheaf of newsfacsimile that he'd just bought fresh from the reproducer in the lobby of the Royal Hotel. Sorban did not look like a man of action; he certainly did not look like a retired colonel of His Imperial Majesty's Own Guard. The most likely reason for this was that he was neither.

Not that he was incapable of action on a physical level if it became necessary; he was past forty, but his tough, hard body was in as fine a shape as it had been fifteen years before, and his reflexes had slowed only slightly. The only major change that had occurred in his body during that time had been the replacement of an irreparably damaged left hand by a prosthetic.

But Lord Barrick Sorban preferred to use his mind, to initiate action in others rather than himself, and his face showed it. His was a precision mind, capable of fast, accurate computations, and his eyes betrayed the fact, but the rest of his face looked, if anything, rather like that of a gentle, persuasive schoolteacher — the type whom children love and parents admire and both obey.

Nor was he a retired colonel of the Imperial bodyguard, except on paper. According to the official records, he had been retired for medical reasons— the missing left hand. In reality, his position in the Imperium was a great deal higher than that of an ordinary colonel, and he was still in the active

service of the Emperor. It was a secret known only to a comparative few, and one that was carefully guarded.

He was a fairly tall man, as an Imperial Guardsman had to be, with a finely-shaped head and dark hair that was shot through with a single streak of gray from an old burn wound. In an officer's uniform, he looked impressive, but in civilian dress he looked like a competent businessman.

He held the newsfac in his prosthetic left hand, which was indistinguishable in appearance and in ordinary usage from the flesh, bone, and blood that it had replaced. Indeed, the right hand, with its stiff little finger, often appeared to be more useless than the left. The hand, holding the glass of rye-and-ginger, gave an impression of over-daintiness because of that stiff digit.

Lord Sorban paid little attention to the other customers in the bar; customers of the Green Room of the Royal Hotel weren't the noisy kind, anyway. He kept his attention on the newsfac for the most part; only a small amount of awareness was reserved for the approach of the man he was waiting for.

The banner line on the newsfac said:

BAIRNVELL OCCUPIED
BY IMPERIAL FORCES

He read through the article hurriedly, absorbing what facts he didn't know, and then flipped over to the editorial page. If he knew the *Globe,* there would sure as Space be an editorial.

There was.

At 0231 Greenwich Earth Time, 3/37/229, the forces of the Imperial Government occupied the planet Bairnvell. (See article, Page One.) The ships of the Imperial Space Force landed, purportedly at the request of Obar Del Pargon, rebel leader of the anti-Presidential forces. That such an action should be condoned by the Imperial File is astounding enough; that it should be ordered by the Prince Portfolio himself is almost unbelievable.

The government of Bairnvell, under the leadership of President Alverdan, was not, by any means, up to the standards of the Empire; the standard of living is lower, and the political freedom of the people is not at all what we are used to. But that is no excuse for interfering with the lawful government of any planet. If the Imperium uses these methods for extending its rule, the time must eventually come when our own civil liberties will be in peril.

Perhaps Lord Senesin's actions are not so surprising, at that. This is the third time during his tenure as Prime Portfolio that he has arbitrarily exercised his power to interfere in the affairs of governments outside the Empire. Each such action has precipitated a crisis in Galactic affairs, and each has brought the Empire nearer to conflict with the Gehan Federation. This one may be the final act that will bring on interstellar war.

The . . .

Colonel Lord Sorban stopped reading as he noticed the approach of the man he'd been waiting for, but he didn't look up until the voice said:

"I see you've been reading it, my lord." The voice was bitter. "A real fiasco this time, eh?"

Sorban looked up. "It looks like it might mean trouble," he said carefully. "Have you read all of it, Mr. Senesin?"

The young man nodded. The bit-

terness in his voice was paralleled by the bitterness reflected in his face. "Oh, yes. I read it. The other newsfacs pretty much agreed with the *Globe*. I'm afraid my father seems to be rather in the soup. Being Prime Portfolio in the Terran Empire isn't the easiest way to stay out of trouble. They'll be screaming for a Special Election next." He sat down next to the colonel and lowered his voice just enough to keep anyone else from hearing it, but not enough to sound conspiratorial. "I think I've got a line on those tapes."

Colonel Sorban raised an eyebrow. "Really? Well, I wish you luck. If you can uncover them in time, you may be able to save your father's career," he said, in a voice that matched Senesin's.

"You don't sound very concerned, my lord," said young Senesin.

"It's not that," said the colonel. "I just find it difficult to believe that—" He cut his words off as another man approached.

The second newcomer was a red-faced, plumpish man with an almost offensively hearty manner. "Well, well! Good afternoon, Lord Sorban! Haven't seen you in some time. A pleasure to see you again, my lord, a distinct pleasure! I don't get to Honolulu often, you know. How long's it been? Four years?"

"Two, I think," said the colonel.

"Really? Only two? It seems longer. How've you been?"

"Well enough," said the colonel. "Excuse me—Mr. Heywood, I'd like to present you to the Honorable Jon Senesin; Mr. Senesin, this is Robar Heywood, of South African Metals."

While the two men shook hands and mouthed the usual pleasantries, Colonel Lord Sorban watched them with an amusement that didn't show on his placid face. Young Senesin was rather angry that the *tête-á-tête* had been interrupted, while Heywood seemed flustered and a trifle stuffy.

"So you're the son of our Prime Portfolio, eh?" he said. There was a trace of hostility in his voice.

Colonel Sorban saw what was coming and made no effort whatsoever to stop it. Instead, he simply sat there in straight-faced enjoyment.

"That's correct, Mr. Heywood," Senesin said, a little stiffly.

"I should have known," Heywood said. "You look a great deal like him. Although I don't know that I've ever seen your picture in the newsfacs or on the screens."

"Dad prefers to keep his family out of the spotlight," said Senesin, "unless we get publicity for something other than the accidental fact that we happen to be the family of the Prime."

"Yes, yes, of course. I see. May I stand the three of us a drink?" Senesin and the colonel were agreeable. The drinks were brought. Heywood took a swallow of his, and remarked casually: "Do you agree with your father's politics, sir?"

"I don't know," Senesin said flatly.

Heywood misunderstood completely. "Yes, I suppose it is a bit disappointing. Hard for a man's son to divide his loyalty like that. You can't support his actions, and yet you hesitate to condemn your own father."

"You mistake my meaning, Mr. Heywood," young Senesin said sharply. "I said, 'I don't know' because I honestly don't know what my father's politics *is* any more."

But Heywood only compounded his error. "Of course not. How could you? Since he became Prime, his policies have been erratic and unpredictable, not to say foolish."

*This is it,* thought the colonel, wondering what young Senesin's reaction would be. He didn't have to wonder longer than half a second.

"Mr. Heywood," said Senesin, his voice oddly tight under the strain of suppressed emotion, "a person should learn to know what he's talking about before he makes any attempt to talk. If you must talk drivel about my father, I'll thank you not to do it in my presence." And before Heywood could formulate an answer, Senesin turned to the colonel. "If you'll pardon me, my lord, I have another errand to perform. I'll see you at eleven." Then he turned and walked out.

Heywood stared at his receding back. "Well," he said after a moment, "I guess I spoke out of turn. But he seemed . . ." He turned back to his drink, shrugged. "Oh, well. Tell me, my lord, what do *you* think of Senesin's policies? How long do you think he'll last in office?"

The colonel adroitly avoided the first question by answering the second. "I dare say he won't last long. There'll be a great fuss in the File, and most of his own party will desert him—I think. They hardly have any choice, considering the reaction of the populace to this Bairnvell thing."

"And I agree," said Heywood decisively. "We've got no business interfering with the lawful governments of planets and systems outside the Empire. The old days of Imperial expansion are over. Why, the way Lord Senesin acts, you'd think Emperor Jerris the First was on the throne."

"Well, not quite," Colonel Lord Sorban said dryly. "I can't imagine any Prime Portfolio in the time of Jerris I daring to act on his own initiative."

"Exactly," said Heywood, just as though the colonel had agreed with him. "That's why we have a constitutional Empire today. One man can't be allowed that much power without the consent of the governed. The people must have a right to depose anyone who abuses the power they give him." He swallowed the remainder of his drink. "Can you imagine what it would be like if the present Emperor tried to pull that sort of stuff? Not that he *would,* mind you; he's too good an Emperor for that. He sticks to his job. But these are different times. And then, too, we can't afford to antagonize the Gehan Federation. After all, I mean, *war* . . ." He shook his head at the thought.

Colonel Lord Sorban had listened to Heywood's soliloquy with patience, but he felt his irritation growing. Much as he had enjoyed the play between Heywood and young Senesin, he had expected to get some information out of the boy before he left.

And besides, Heywood's clichéd monologue was beginning to pall.

Therefore, the colonel finished his own drink, uttered some polite banalities and got out.

He walked around the corner to the restaurant, was bowed into a seat by an ultrapolite android, and quietly ordered his meal. While he waited, he spread the newsfac on the table in front of him, holding it with his right hand while his left elbow rested on the table and his left palm cradled his left jaw. In that position, there was nothing odd-looking about the fact that his left thumbtip was in contact with his larynx and his left middle finger was pressed tightly against the mastoid bone just behind his left ear. His lips began to move slightly, and anyone at a nearby table would have assumed that he was one of those readers who are habitual lip-movers.

"The Senesin boy says he has a lead on the tapes. That's all I could get out of him just now, but I have an appointment with him at eleven tonight. How far shall I let him go, Sire?"

The sensitive microphone in the tip of his thumb picked up the nearly inaudible sounds; the speaker in his middle finger vibrated against his skull and brought him the answer to his question.

"For the moment, I'll leave that up to you. But I wouldn't try to stop him just yet."

"Very well, Sire," murmured the colonel. He had already made up his mind to let the Senesin boy go as far as he could. The lad was smart, and his attack would at least provide a test for the psycho-sociological defenses that surrounded the Emperor.

"Do you think those tapes—if they exist—are genuine?" the voice asked.

"According to young Senesin," the colonel said carefully, "the tapes are supposed to show that certain . . . ah . . . 'highly-placed persons' in the Imperial hierarchy are influencing members of the Government illegally. You figure out what that might mean, Sire; it's a little too ambiguous to mean much to me."

" 'Influencing,' eh? That could mean anything from a broad hint, through pressure and bribery, to actual brainwashing," said the voice from the finger.

"Which one do you think it is, Sire?" the colonel asked with mock innocency.

The voice chuckled, then said, "I haven't tried brainwashing yet."

"No-o-o," agreed the colonel, "but you might have to if Lord Evondering gets in, and if you have to, you will."

"Colonel," said the voice gently, "there are times when I believe you don't have a very high opinion of your Sovereign's moral outlook."

The colonel grinned, although he knew the listener couldn't see it. But he knew the other was grinning, too. "I humbly beg your majesty's pardon."

"You'll have to wait a while, colonel; Imperial pardons have to be by the Portfolio for the Interior. Your Sovereign is an impotent figurehead."

"Sure you are, Sire," said the colo-

nel. "Meanwhile, what about those tapes?"

"Get them—or copies of them. They can't be dangerous in themselves, but if they're genuine, I want to know who's bugging this place. I can't have spies in the Palace itself. Otherwise, keep your eyes on the Senesin boy."

The voice went on giving instructions, but the colonel lifted the thumb of his left hand from his larynx; the waiter was approaching, and if he wanted to speak to him, it would be better not to have to interrupt the flow of words from his finger.

The android put the dishes on the table. "Coffee, sir?"

"Yes," said the colonel. "Cream, no sugar. And bring a second cup as soon as I've finished with the first." Only a part of his attention was given to the waiter; the rest was focused on the instructions he was receiving. The instructions kept coming until after the coffee had been brought. Then the voice said:

"Any questions?"

"No, Sire," said the colonel, replacing his thumb.

"Very well. I'll be expecting your report sometime between eleven and midnight."

The colonel nodded, brought his hand down from the side of his jaw to pick up his fork and begin a concerted attack on his lunch.

Hawaii, with its beauty and its perfect climate, had been the obvious choice for the center of the Terran Empire. For centuries before the coming of interstellar travel, the islands had been used to a mixture of tongues and races, and the coming of the Empire had merely added to that mixture. In the five centuries since Man had begun his explosive spread to the stars, more "races" had come into being due to the genetic variations and divisions that occurred as small groups of isolated colonists were cut off from Earth and from each other. The fact that interstellar vessels incorporating the contraspace drive were relatively inexpensive to build, plus the fact that nearly every G-type sun had an Earth-like planet in Bode's Third Position, had made scattering to the stars almost an automatic reflex among men.

It had also shattered the cohesion of Mankind that had been laboriously built up over several millennia. The old U.N. government had gradually welded together the various nations of Earth under one flag, and for nearly two centuries it had run Earth like a smoothly operating machine. But no culture is immortal; even the U.N. must fall, and fall it did.

And, during the chaos that followed, a man named Jerris Danfors had grabbed the loosened reins of government just as Napoleon had done after the French Revolution. Unlike Napoleon, however, Jerris had been able to hold his power without abusing it; he was able to declare himself Emperor of Earth and make it stick. The people *wanted* a single central government, and they were willing to go back to the old idea of Empire just to get such a government.

Jerris the First was neither a power-mad dictator nor an altruist, although

he had been called both. He was, purely and simply, a strong, wise, intelligent man—which made him abnormal, no matter how you look at it. Or supernormal, if you will.

Like Napoleon, he realized that wars of conquest were capable of being used as a kind of cement to hold the people together in support of their Emperor. But, again, unlike Napeleon, he found there was no need to sap the strength of Earth to fight those wars. The population and productive capacity of Earth was greater than any possible coalition among extra-Solar planets and vastly greater than any single planet alone.

Thus the Terran Empire had come into being with only a fraction of the internal disruption which normally follows empire-building.

But Man can flee as well as fight. Every invading army is preceded by hordes of refugees. Ships left every planet threatened by the Empire, seeking new, uncharted planets to settle—planets that would be safe from the Imperial Fleet because they were hidden among a thousand thousand stars. Mankind spread through the galaxy faster than the Empire could. Not even Jerris the First could completely consolidate the vast reaches of the galaxy into a single unit; one lifetime is simply not enough.

Nor are a dozen.

Slowly, the Empire had changed. Over the next several generations, the Emperors had yielded more and more of the absolute power that had been left to them by Jerris. While history never exactly repeats itself, a parallel could be drawn between the history of the Empire and the history of England between, say, 1550 and 1950. But, while England's empire had begun to recede with the coming of democratic government, the Terran Empire continued to spread—more slowly than at first, but steadily.

Until, that is, the Empire had touched the edges of the Gehan Federation.

For the hordes that had fled from the Empire had not forgotten her; they knew that one day the Empire would find them, that one day they would have to fight for their independence. So they formed the Federation, with its capitol on the third planet of Gehan's Sun.

It was a federation in name only. Even after several generations, the refugees had not been able to build up enough population to fight the Empire. There was only one other way out, as they saw it. They formed a military dictatorship.

In the Twentieth Century, the German Third Reich, although outnumbered by its neighbors and enemies, populationwise, had concentrated all its efforts on building an unbeatable war machine. Japan, also outnumbered, had done likewise. Between them, they thought they could beat the rest of Earth. And they came dangerously close to succeeding.

The Gehan Federation had done the same thing, building up fleets and armies and material stockpiles as though she were already at war.

And, in doing so, her citizens had voluntarily forfeited the very thing

they thought they were fighting for—their freedom.

But they posed a greater threat to the Terran Empire than that Empire had ever faced before. Any nation so totally prepared for defensive war may, at any moment, decide that the best defense is a good offense. Any nation which subjects its people to semislavery for the sake of war must eventually fight that war or suffer collapse.

The Empire had to change tactics. Instead of steady expansion, she was forced into a deadly game of interstellar chess, making her plays carefully, so as not to touch off the explosive temper of her opponent.

It was not a situation to be handled by clumsy fools.

And Lord Senesin, the Prime Portfolio of the Imperial File, the elected leader of the Empire, the constitutional head of the Imperial Government, was accused, not only of being a clumsy fool, but of being a dangerous madman. The planet Bairnvell was an independent, autonomic ally of the Gehan Federation, and, although not actually a member of the Federation, was presumably under her protection. For the Imperial Fleet to go to the aid of rebels trying to overthrow Bairnvell's lawful government seemed to be the act of an insane mind. The people of the Empire wouldn't stand for it.

Colonel Lord Barrick Sorban was well aware of the temper of the people and of the situation that prevailed politically in the Empire—more so, in fact, than most men. He was also well aware that internal strife of a very serious nature could so dangerously weaken the Empire that the Gehan Federation would be able to attack and win.

His job was to cut off that sort of thing before it could gain momentum. His job was to maintain the Empire; his only superior was the Emperor himself; his subordinates hand-picked, well-trained, and, like himself, unobtrusive to the public eye. And not one of those subordinates knew who the colonel's superior was.

The colonel strolled along the streets of Honolulu with all the courteous aplomb of a man who was both an officer and a gentleman of leisure. He dropped in at various respectable clubs and did various respectable things. He went into other places and did other things not so respectable. He gave certain orders to certain people and made certain odd arrangements. When everything had been set up to his satisfaction, he ate a leisurely dinner, topped it off with two glasses of Velaskan wine, read the tenth edition of the *Globe,* and strolled out to the street again, looking every inch the impeccable gentleman.

At ten minutes of eleven, he took a skycab to the fashionable apartment house where the Honorable Jon Senesin, son of the Prime Portfolio, made his home. The skycab deposited him on the roof at two minutes of eleven. The android doorman opened the entrance for him, and he took the drop chute down to the fifteenth floor. At precisely eleven o'clock, he

was facing the announcer plate on Jon Senesin's door.

Senesin opened the door. There was a queer look—half jubilant, half worried—on his face as he said: "Come in, my lord, come in. Care for a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do, Jon. Brandy, if you have it."

Young Senesin poured the brandy, speaking rapidly as he did. "I've made an appointment to get those tapes, my lord. I want you to go with me. If we can get them, we can break this whole fraud wide open. Wide open." He handed the colonel a crystal goblet half filled with the clear, red-brown liquid. "Sorry I left so hurriedly this morning, but if that Heywood character had said another word I'd have broken his nose for him."

The colonel took the goblet and looked into its depths. "Jon, what do you expect these tapes to prove?"

The young man's face darkened. He walked across the spacious room, brandy goblet in hand, and sat down on the wall couch before he spoke.

"Just what I told you, my lord. I expect to prove that my father's mind has been tampered with—that he is not responsible for the decisions that have been made in his name—that he is going to lose his position and his reputation and his career for something that he would never have done in his right mind—that he has been the duped pawn of someone else."

The colonel walked over toward the couch and stood over the young man. "Someone? You keep referring to 'someone.' Ever since you asked me to help you, you've been mysterious about this someone. Whom do you suspect?"

Senesin looked up at the colonel for a long moment before he answered. Then: "I suspect the Emperor himself," he said, half defiantly.

The colonel raised his finely-drawn brows just a fraction of an inch, as though he hadn't known what the answer would be. "The Emperor? Hannikar IV? Isn't that a little farfetched?"

Senesin shook his head vehemently. "Don't you see? Legally, the Emperor is powerless; the Throne hasn't had any say-so in the Government for over a century—except to sign state papers and such. But suppose an Emperor came along who wanted power—power such as the old Emperors used to have. How would he go about getting it? By controlling the Government! He could slowly force them to give him back the powers that the people of the Empire have taken so many centuries to obtain."

The colonel shook his head. "Impossible. Not even the Emperor could control the votes of the whole File for that purpose. It simply couldn't be done."

"Not that way; of course not," the young man said irritably. "But there *is* a way. It's been used before. Are you up on your history?"

"Reasonably well," the colonel said dryly.

"How did Julius Caesar get dictatorial powers? And, after him, Augustus? Rome was threatened by war, and then actually engaged in it, and the patricians were glad to give power to a strong man."

"That was in a state ruled by the few patricians," the colonel pointed out, "not in a democracy."

"Very well, then; what about the United States, during World War II? Look at the extraordinary powers granted to the President—first to stop a depression, then to win a war. What might have happened if he hadn't died? Would he have gone on to a fifth and a sixth term? How much more power could he have usurped from the hands of Congress?"

The colonel wondered vaguely what history texts young Senesin had read, but he didn't ask. "All right," he said, "now tie your examples up with His Majesty."

"It's very simple. By controlling the mind of the Prime Portfolio, the Emperor can plunge the Empire into war with the Gehan Federation. Once that has been done, he can begin to ask for extraordinary powers from the File. If he has a few key men under his thumb, he can swing the majority of

the File any way he wants to. Don't you see that?"

The colonel said: "It does make a certain amount of sense." He paused, looking at the young man speculatively. "Tell me, son: why did you pick me to tell this tale to?"

Senesin's sensitive face betrayed his anxiety. "Because you have been my father's best and oldest friend. If he's really being made a puppet of, I should think you'd want to help him. Do you like to see him being destroyed this way?"

"No," said the colonel honestly. "And if he is actually being controlled illegally, if he is actually being blamed for things he did not do of his own free will, I'll do everything in my power to expose the plot—that I promise you."

Jon Senesin's eyes lit up; his face broke into a smile. "I *knew* I could depend on you, my lord! I *knew* it!"

"Just how do you propose to go about this?" asked Colonel Lord Sorban.

There was fire in young Senesin's eyes now. "I'll turn the whole case over to the people! I have some evidence, of course; the queer changes in behavior that Dad has exhibited during the past few years, and such things as that. The things that made me suspect in the first place. But that isn't acceptable evidence." He finished his brandy and got up excitedly to walk over and pour himself another. He glanced at the colonel's goblet, but the colonel had three-quarters of his own drink left.

Senesin talked as he poured. "Did you ever hear of a group called the Federalist Party?"

"Yes," said Colonel Sorban. "They want to federalize the Empire and get rid of the Imperial Family. Not a very popular group."

"No, but they're right! They're right! Don't you see that? And nobody pays any attention to them!"

"Calm down, son. What have the Federalists got to do with this?"

"They have sympathizers in the Palace," Senesin explained. "They've been able to get proof that the Emperor is illegally tampering with the Government, that he's been brainwashing my father. And they're going to turn that proof over to me."

"I don't quite follow the reason for that," the colonel lied easily. "Why don't they use it themselves?"

"They can't. Nobody'd believe them. Everyone would think that the proof had been faked for political propaganda.

"On the other hand, if *I* do it, all I can be accused of is having a personal motive. And if a man wants to get his father out of a jam, most people will agree that I have a perfect right to do so. Besides, I have enough influence to get people to listen to me, to give the evidence a fair hearing. If the newsies got this stuff from the Federalists, they'd throw it away without looking at it. But they'll listen to me."

"The newsies?" asked the colonel in a perfect imitation of mild astonishment. "You intend to turn this stuff over to news publishers?"

"Certainly! That's the only way. Put the evidence before the people, and they'll see what they're up against. I personally don't care whether we have an Emperor or not, but at least we can force Hannikar IV to abdicate in favor of Crown Prince Jaimie."

"I see." The colonel took another sip at his brandy and appeared to think it over. Wisely, young Senesin said nothing.

"How are we to get this evidence?" the colonel asked at last.

"We're to meet a man," Senesin said, with an air of melodrama. "We will get a call at fifteen of twelve, telling us where to meet him. We have to be there at midnight."

*Oh, brother,* thought the colonel, *they really picked their man. They've got him thinking he's hip-deep in a romantic spy story.*

*Was I that way at twenty-two? A romantic? I suppose I must have been; why else would I have joined the Guards? Not for the pay, certainly.*

*Hell, I guess I'm still a romantic, in a way. Being a secret agent isn't all fun and games, but it has its compensations.*

Aloud, he said, "Very well, son; I'll go with you. Did you tell them there'd be someone accompanying you?"

"I told them I'd have a friend along. I told them it would be you. They said it was all right, that they knew you were a friend of Dad's. They even knew you've been a little bitter at being retired from the Guards so young." He looked embarrassed. "Pardon me, my lord."

"That's all right," said the colonel steadily. He managed to give the appearance of a man who was doing his best not to look bitter.

"You aren't carrying a gun, are you?" Senesin asked suddenly. "They said we weren't to be armed. They'll probably search us."

"I haven't been in the habit of carrying a gun lately," said the colonel. "They won't find anything on me."

He finished his brandy while Senesin finished his second one. While the younger man refilled both goblets, the colonel asked permission to use the bathroom. He was gone less than three minutes, which he had spent with thumb and middle finger to larynx and mastoid bone.

At eleven forty-five promptly, the phone chimed. No face appeared on the screen when young Senesin answered it, but a voice gave an address on Kalia Road.

Three minutes later, the two men were on the roof, signaling for a skycab.

At ten o'clock the next morning, a panel slid aside in a wall that had previously seemed solid. Colonel Lord Barrick Sorban stepped into the room, thinking as he did so that he really was a romantic. He actually rather enjoyed the idea of using secret passages and hidden panels to gain access to the Emperor's private apartments in the Imperial Palace.

He gave a gentle nod to the man

in the blue lounging robe who sat in a big easy-chair just across the room. "Good morning, Sire."

"'Morning, colonel," said His Imperial Majesty, Hannekar IV. "How are things shaping up?"

The colonel chuckled. "Not a single one of the newsies printed a word of it, Sire."

These men were close friends, and had been for years, yet they clung to the formal titles, both from habit and for self-protection. The accidental use of a first name could mean a dead giveaway at the wrong time.

The Emperor was a smaller man than Colonel Sorban, but he was far more impressive. While the colonel seemed rather mild, the Emperor looked—well, Imperial. He looked just as an Emperor ought to look—handsome, dark-haired, stern at times and kindly at others. The square jaw gave an impression of firmness of character, while the sapphire-blue eyes were penetrating without being harsh or hard.

"What about the Senesin boy?" he asked.

"He's in jail," said the colonel.

His Imperial Majesty raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" It was a question and a command.

"Not by my orders," said the colonel quickly. "He got a little upset. He'd taken those tapes and documents around to four editors and had been thrown out four times. The fifth time —at the *Globe,* as a matter of fact —he accused the editor of being in your pay. A hassle started, and the editor called the Honolulu police. Don't worry, Sire; one of my boys got the tapes and stuff."

"Is it genuine?"

"The evidence? Yes. The Federalists had the goods on you, all right." He grinned. "As you said, everything but brainwashing."

"I'll take care of it," said the Emperor. "Prince Jaimie's been going through the family files, and I rather want him to see this batch of stuff, too. Meantime, get the Senesin boy out of that cell; I want to see him. He's got guts, if nothing else."

"He has sense, too, Sire; he's just a little too young yet." He almost added "and romantic," but he stopped himself in time.

"How long will it take to get him out?" His Majesty asked.

"I can have him here in half an hour. The editor of the *Globe* will drop the charges. I can put a little pressure on in the right places."

The Emperor nodded. After a moment, he thumbed a button on his chair arm. "Inform Lord Senesin that he is requested to appear for a Royal Audience in forty-five minutes," he said firmly.

"Yes, Sire," said a voice from a hidden speaker.

The Emperor looked at the colonel. "Get the boy."

Jon Senesin sat in a soft chair, his hands gripping at the arms as though it might at any time fall from under him. He looked at the three other men in the room. His father, Lord Senesin, looking rather tired, but with a slight smile on his lantern-jawed face, sat on

his son's left. One hand ran nervously through his gray hair.

On Jon's right sat the colonel, looking cool, unperturbed, and very gentle. Between them sat the Emperor.

Jon's face looked pale, and there was a slight nervous tic at the corner of his mouth. "I . . . I don't understand," he said. "I—" He swallowed hard as his voice failed him.

"Nothing hard to understand, son," said the colonel mildly. "We've been looking for evidence to break up the Federalists for several years. Some of them are honest men who are simply against any kind of hereditary monarchy—we'll let them go eventually. Some of them are fanatics—the kind that is against any form of government that happens to be in power; they'll get psychiatric treatment. But the leaders of the group are agents of the Gehan Federation. My men are picking them up now. The man that contacted you and me last night was arrested within two minutes after we left."

"But—the *evidence!* Those tapes. The documents. They all seemed genuine. They seemed so convincing."

"They should be convincing, Jon," said Lord Senesin in his smooth oratorical baritone. "You see, they are perfectly true."

Jon Senesin looked at his father as though the older man had suddenly sprouted an extra set of ears. "Y . . . You've been brainwashed?"

The Prime Portfolio shook his head. "No, son, not that. Did you see anything like that on the tapes?"

"N-no. But the others. Fileman Brenner, Portfolio for Defense Vane, General Finster—all of them. I thought—"

"You thought wrong, son," said Lord Senesin. "I am and always have been working loyally with His Majesty. He gives the orders, and I carry them out."

Jon's voice became taut. "You mean you're helping him? You're trying to get the Empire into a war with the Gehan Federation so that *he* can become another dictator, like Jerris the First?" He kept his eyes carefully averted from the Emperor as he spoke.

Thus he didn't notice that His Majesty looked at Colonel Sorban with an expression that said, "You're right. He does have guts."

Lord Senesin said: "No, son; I'm not working toward that at all. Neither is His Majesty. There would be no point in it."

Then, for the first time, the Emperor spoke. His voice was soft, but commanding. "Mr. Senesin, let me explain something to you."

Jon Senesin's head jerked around. There was a confused mixture of fear and determination on his face.

"Mr. Senesin, I no more want war than you do. I am trying to avoid it with every power at my command. I have that duty to my people. But I have another duty, too. A duty, not just to the Empire, but to the human race as a whole. And that duty is to establish, not a Terran Empire, but a Galactic Empire—a single, consolidated government for every planet in the galaxy. Man can't go on this way,

divided, split up, warring with himself. Man can't live in isolation, cut off from other worlds, other types of societies.

"We can't have a part of the human race living in constant fear of another part. We can't allow the conditions that exist at this moment in the Gehan Federation. To paraphrase Lincoln, 'The galaxy cannot exist half slave and half free.'

"Right now, there is evidence that the Gehan Federation will collapse internally within less than five years. The only way for the President of the Federation to avert that collapse will be to declare war on the Empire. We have had to take certain risks in order to insure that when and if war does come, we will win it.

"Bairnvell was one of those risks. Not too great a one, as it turns out; evidently the Federation government doesn't see that our possession of that base is a vital factor in our own defense. Strategy in three dimensions isn't easy to reason out.

"Mr. Senesin, I have no desire for power in a personal way. Any power I have is used for the good of my people. I have no police system for terrorizing the people; I don't suppress the freedom of every man to say or print what he wants. To call your Sovereign a fatheaded slob in a newsfac might be considered bad taste, but it isn't illegal. I can't even bring a civil suit against you, the way an ordinary citizen could.

"Now, I'll grant that I sometimes use illegal means to control the Empire. But there are reasons for that. I—"

He was interrupted by a soft chime. He pressed a button on his armchair. "Yes?"

"You go on the interstellar hookup in twenty minutes, Sire. The File has assembled," said a voice from a speaker.

"I'll be right there." He stood up and glanced apologetically at the other three men. "Sorry. Political announcement, you know. You two go ahead and explain to Mr. Senesin." Then he looked directly at the Prime Portfolio. "I'll tell them you're slightly ill." He reached out, took Lord Senesin's hand, and grasped it firmly. "I'll make it look good, old friend, don't worry. I'll need your help with Lord Evondering when he gets the Primacy."

The other men were on their feet already. They watched in silence as he walked out the door, then eased themselves back into their chairs.

"I still don't understand," Jon said softly. The bitterness and anger seemed to have left him, leaving only puzzlement in their wake. "If you take orders from him, Dad, then this isn't a democracy any more. It's become another Imperial dictatorship."

"Son," said his father, "the Empire never has been a democracy in the sense you're thinking about. Ever since Jerris the First, it has been ruled solely by the Emperors. Always.

"The Imperial Family is a special breed, son. It's a genetic strain in which the quality of wise leadership is

dominant. It's a quality that's more than just intelligence; wisdom is the ability to make correct judgments, not only for one's self, but for others."

"But, Dad!" There was almost a wail in the boy's voice. "That makes the whole democratic system in the Empire a farce! It's totally unnecessary! *You're* unnecessary! He could run everything by himself!"

Lord Senesin started to say something, but Colonel Sorban interrupted.

"No, you young fool, he is *not* unnecessary! He is, in a very real sense, the Emperor's shield. Our Emperors have always given the people of the Empire the kind of government they *need,* not the kind of government they *want.* There are certain things that *must* be done, whether the people like those things or not.

"How long do you think the Empire would last without the Imperial Line to guide it? Not ten years! The thing is too big, too vast, for any ordinary man to handle the job. The voters are perfectly capable of electing a man to the Primacy on the strength of his likable personality alone—look at Lord Evondering. A hell of a pleasant guy, without a glimmering of real wisdom.

"When the people don't like the things the Government does, they throw it out—even if the thing done was actually for the best. The people demand a new Government. We can't allow them to throw the Emperor out, so we need a scapegoat. This time, it happened to be your father, here. He happened to be Prime at a crucial time, and he had to give orders that made him unpopular. So he'll have to get out, and let the Loyal Opposition take over. But the Emperor will go right on running things.

"Your father is far from unnecessary, son. He's a hero, dammit, and you'd better remember that! He's taking the rap for another man because he knows that he is expendable and the other man isn't.

"Oh, your father could probably ride this thing out and stay in the Primacy for a couple more years. But this mess with the Federation is going to get a lot stickier than it is now. The Emperor is going to have to do things that the people will hate even worse, and we might as well let that fool Evondering take the rap. He'll look so bad by the time he leaves the Primacy that everyone will be screaming for your father back again, to clean up the mess."

Jon Senesin still looked dazed. "But, if that's the case, why allow the people to vote at all?"

"Because that's the only way you can keep an Empire stable! As long as the average man feels he has a voice in his Government, he's forced to admit that any failures are partly his own fault. Nobody rebels against a government he can vote against. As long as he has ballots, he won't use bullets."

Lord Senesin said: "I know it's a shock, coming this way. But look at it right, son."

"I am," said Jon slowly. "At least, I think I am. But it doesn't really

seem right. Not yet." He looked at the colonel. "One thing I don't understand, my lord. Why did you let me take all that evidence around to the newsies? And why are you telling me all this now? I'm still not fully convinced. Aren't you afraid I'll tell the whole story?"

But it was his father who answered. "You tried that, son. It didn't work, did it?"

"No. But *why?* Why wouldn't they believe me, even when I had all that evidence?"

"Because they don't *want* to believe you," said the colonel. "Ever hear of a father-image? The Emperor is a symbol, Jon. He's not a human being in the eyes of the average man. He's the kind All-Father, the godlike being who dispenses mercy, but not justice.

"Haven't you ever noticed that orders of judgment against criminals are signed only by the courts and by the Portfolio of the Interior? But pardons and paroles are signed by the Emperor.

"It may not sound ethical to you, but that's the way the Emperor has to operate. He takes credit for all the nice things he does, and lets others take the blame for anything that's distasteful.

"You could blat it around all over fifty star systems that the Emperor was a louse, and all you'd get is a poke in the eye for your troubles.

"It's not easy for him, and don't ever kid yourself that it is. He's going out there now to tell the Empire that your father and his Government have resigned. He has to try to make his best friend and most loyal subject look a little less black than he has been painted, and all the time it was the Emperor who wielded the paint gun. Do you think that's fun?"

"No," said Jon softly. "No, I guess not." He paused. "Wouldn't it have been easier to take the evidence away from me, though?"

"No. That would have left you furious. No amount of talking would have convinced you. As it was, you convinced yourself that there is no way to attack the Emperor directly. He's safe right where he is."

Jon shook his head slowly. "It all seems so . . . so tangled. It still seems as though the whole deception is . . . well, *wrong,* somehow."

"If you look at it in a certain way," said Lord Senesin, "I suppose it does seem wrong. But it's necessary. Absolutely necessary."

"Maybe," said Jon, still unconvinced. "It certainly does look as though His Majesty has himself in an almost impregnable position. It's a wonder he needs agents like you."

Colonel Lord Barrick Sorban smiled a little. The boy would see the thing straight eventually. He had what it took, even if it didn't show much at this stage. Actually, he was more than halfway convinced now, but wouldn't admit it to himself yet. At least he'd been able to put a finger on one thing.

Aloud, the colonel said: "You're not altogether wrong there, son. When you come right down to it, *I'm* the unnecessary man."

THE END

# I WAS A TEEN-AGE SECRET WEAPON

*He could truthfully say that he never hurt anybody. You know—like the eye of a hurricane? It never hurts anybody . . .*

BY RICHARD SABIA

Illustrated by Freas

ET AWAY from me!" screamed Dr. Berry at the approaching figure.

"But Ah got to feed an' water the animals an' clean out the cages," drawled the lanky, eighteen-year-old boy amiably.

"Get out of this laboratory you hoodoo," shrilled Berry, "or I swear I'll kill you! I'll not give you the chance to do me in!"

Tow-headed Dolliver Wims regarded chubby Dr. Berry with his innocent green eyes. "Ah don't know why y'all fuss at me like you do," he complained in aggrieved tones.

"YOU DON'T KNOW WHY!" shrieked two hundred and eighteen pounds of outraged Dr. Berry. "How *dare* you stand there and say you don't know why?" Berry flung a pudgy hand within an inch of Wims' nose. Slashed across the back of it, like frozen lightning, was a new, jagged scar. "That's why!" he shouted. Berry twisted his head into profile, thrust it at Wims and pointed to a slightly truncated ear lobe. "And that's why!" he roared. He yanked up a trouser leg, revealing a finely pitted patch of skin. "And also why!" he yelled. He paused to snatch a breath and glared at the boy. "And if I weren't so modest I'd show you another why!"

"Kin Ah help it if you're always havin' accidents?" Wims replied with a shrug.

Berry turned a deeper red and a dangerous rumble issued from his throat, as if he were a volcano threatening to erupt. Then quite suddenly, with an obvious effort, he capped his seething anger and subsided somewhat. Through taut lips he said, "I'm not going to stand here and argue with you, Wims; just get out."

"But the animals—"

"You can come back in an hour when I've finished running these rats through the maze."

"But—"

"I SAID OUT!" Berry leaped at Wims with arms outthrust, intending to push him toward the door, but Wims had stepped aside in slight alarm and the avalanche of meat plunged past and into a bench on which rested a huge, multilevel glass maze which was a shopping-center model being tested to determine a design that would subliminally compel shoppers into bankruptcy. There was a sustained and magnificent tinkling crash as if a Chinese windchime factory was entertaining a typhoon. Berry skidded on the shards into a bank of wooden cages and went down in a splintering welter of escaping chimpanzees, Wister albino rats, ocelots and other assorted fauna.

Wims moved forward to help extricate the stunned Dr. Berry from the Everest of debris in which he sat immersed.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" Berry screeched.

"O.K.," Wims said, retreating, "but Ah guess y'all gonna blame me fer this, too."

Berry's mouth worked convulsively in sheer rage but he had no words left to contain it. He put his head on his knees and sobbed.

The other psychologists of the research division came crowding into the laboratory to seek the cause of all the tumult.

"What happened?" Dr. Wilholm inquired.

"Well, Doc Berry has gone an' riled hisself into 'nuther accident," Wims informed him.

"I suppose you had nothing to do with it," Wilholm snapped.

"Cain't rightly say Ah had. He worked it out all by hisself."

"Just like the rest of us, I suppose," Wilholm said with unconcealed hostility.

"Well now y'all mention it, Doc, Ah ain't nevah seen sich a collection o' slip-fingered folk. Always bustin' either their gear or theirselves."

"Listen, you—"

"Now lookit Doc Castle up on top o' that lockah. He's gonna bust a leg if he don't quit foolin' with that critter."

Wilholm turned to see Dr. Castle up near the ceiling trying to get at a chimpanzee perched just out of reach on a steam pipe. "Castle, are you crazy?" he cried. "Get down from there before you hurt yourself."

"But I've got to get Zsa Zsa into a cage before one of the cats gets her," Castle protested. Just then an ocelot leaped for Zsa Zsa and she leaped for Dr. Castle who promptly lost his balance and plummeted toward Dr. Wilholm who foolishly tried to catch him. They all crashed to the floor and lay stunned for some moments. Castle attempted to rise but he sank back almost immediately with a grimace of pain. "I think my leg is broken," he announced.

"Well Ah tole you," Wims said. "Ain't that so, Dr. Wilholm?"

Wilholm attempted to hurl Zsa Zsa at Wims but found to his surprise he could only wriggle his fingers. The effort sent little slivers of pain slicing through his back.

By this time the laboratory was resounding with the fury of a riot sale in a bargain basement. Sounds of destruction, counterpointed with cries of pain and imprecations increased as the staff pursued maddeningly elusive animals through a growing jungle of toppled and overturning equipment. At the far end there was a shower of sparks and a flash of flame as something furry plunged into a network of wires and vacuum tubes.

Two hours later, Dr. Titus, the division chief, strolled in just as the firemen quenched the last stubborn flames. He surveyed the nearly total ruin of the laboratory. "Really!" he said to a thickly bandaged Dr. Berry who was attempting to rescue an undamaged electroencephalograph from a gleeful fireman's ax, "can't you test your hypothesis without being so untidy?"

Dr. Berry whirled and struck Dr. Titus.

"Of course you know what this means," Titus said calmly, rubbing his jaw. "I'll just have to have a closer look at your Rorschach."

"You can just go take a closer look," Berry snarled.

"Now, now," Titus said soothingly, "why don't we just go to my office and find out what is disturbing us? Hm-m-m?"

The ax came down on the encephalograph and Berry burst into tears and allowed Titus to lead him away.

Titus seated himself at his desk and waited for the sobbing Berry to subside. "That's it," he said unctuously, "let's just get it right out of our systems, shall we? Hm-m-m?"

Berry stopped in mid-sob and became all tiger again. "Stop talking to me as if I were a schizo!" he roared.

"Now, now, we are not going to become hostile all over again are we? Hm-m-m?"

"Hm-m-m all you want to, Titus, but you'll change your tune soon enough when you hear what happened. It was no band-aid brouhaha this time. I've warned you time and again about Wims and you've chosen to treat the matter as airily as possible —almost to the point of being elfin. However, the casualty list ought to bring you back down to earth." Berry ticked off the names on his fingers: "Dr. Wilholm hospitalized with a broken back; Dr. Castle, a broken leg; Dr. Angelillo, Dr. Bernstein, Dr. Maranos and four lab technicians severely burned; Dr. Grossblatt and two assistants, badly clawed; Dr. Cahill, clawed and burned; and no one knows what's wrong with Dr. Zimmerman. He's locked himself in the broom closet and refuses to come out. Twelve other people will be out a day or two with minor injuries, including your secretary who was pursued by Elvira, the orangutan, and is now being treated for shock."

Titus protested, "Why Elvira wouldn't harm—"

"Elvira has been misnamed. Elvis might be more appropriate."

"Why I had no idea," Titus mused. "Now I'll have to rerun those tests with the new bias."

Berry flared up again. "You don't even have a lab left to run a test in. You can't keep Wims after this!"

"Are you blaming poor Wims for what happened?"

"How can you sit there and ask that question without choking? Ever since that two-legged disaster was hired to sweep up, everybody in the psycho-research division has suffered from one accident after another; even you haven't remained unscathed. Why within the month he arrived we lost the plaque we had won two years running for our unmarred safety record. In fact, the poor fellow who came to remove it from its place of honor in the staff dining room fell from the ladder and broke his neck. Guess who was holding the ladder?"

"I was there at the time," Titus said, "and I saw the entire performance. Wims did nothing but hold the ladder as he had been instructed to do. Old John, instead of confining his attention to what he was doing, kept worrying about whether or not the ladder was being held firmly enough and, as could be expected, he dropped the plaque, made a grab for it and down he went."

"Don't you think it significant, Titus, that Old John had been the

university handyman for eighteen years, had climbed up and down ladders, over roofs, and had never fallen or had a serious accident until Wims came upon the scene? And this is just about the case with everyone here?"

"Yes, I think it is very significant."

"Then how can anyone but Wims be blamed?"

"But *Wims* never has the accidents. *He* never gets hurt; not so much as a scratch!"

"The devil never gets burned."

"My dear Berry, let the scientist in you consider the fact that never yet has Wims so much as laid a finger on any of our people. And Wims never knocks over equipment, or lets things explode, or sets fire to anything. I find it very odd that it is only my staff that does these things and yet to a man they invariably fix the blame on an eighteen-year-old lad who seems to want nothing more out of life than to be liked. Don't you find it odd?"

"The only thing I find odd is your keeping him in the face of the unanimous staff request to get rid of him."

"And have you ever thought of what my reason might be?"

Dr. Berry looked hard at Dr. Titus and said with unmistakable emphasis, "Some of your people think they know."

It took Titus a moment to fully understand, then he said severely: "Let's discuss this sensibly."

"There's no point in further discussion. There's only one thing more I have to say. I'm not going to endanger my life any longer. Either Wims goes or you can have my resignation."

"Are you serious?"

"Certainly."

"Well then, it was pleasant having a good friend as an associate. I'm certain you will easily find something more satisfactory. Of course you can depend on me for a glowing letter of reference."

Berry sat openmouthed. "You mean to say you'd keep a mere porter in preference to me?"

Titus regarded his steepled fingers. "In this case I'm afraid so."

The telephone in the outer office rang several times before Titus remembered he was without his secretary. He pressed a stud and took the call on his line. He identified himself and after listening a long while without comment, he spoke. "That's very good, general, two weeks will be fine. You understand he must be commissioned as soon as possible, perhaps at the end of basic training . . . Of course I know it's unheard of but it's got to be done. I realize you are not too happy about being brought into this but someone on the General Staff is needed to pull the necessary strings and the President assured me that we could depend on your complete co-operation." Titus listened and when he spoke again a trace of anger edged his voice. "I don't know why you are so hostile to this project, general. If it succeeds, the benefit to the free world will be

immense. If not, all we stand to lose is one man, no equipment to speak of; not even 'face' since it need not ever be made known. A far cry, I must say, from the military, whose expensive Roman candles, when they do manage to get off the ground, keep falling out of the sky and denting Florida and New Mexico with depressing regularity. Good-by!"

Titus hung up and turned to Berry. "Now, my dear Berry, if you'll withdraw your resignation we can go and have dinner and plot how we can milk more funds from the university to refurbish the lab and keep ourselves from getting fired in the process."

"My mind is made up, Titus, and all your cajoling will not get me to change it."

"But Wims is going," Titus said, nodding toward the phone. "In two weeks he will be in the Army."

Berry's face went white. "Heaven preserve us," he gasped.

"Really, my dear Berry, for a jolly, fat man you can be positively bleak at times."

"Let's get the finest dinner we can buy," Berry said. "It may be one of our last."

Private Dolliver Wims liked the Army but was unhappy because the Army did not like him. After only two weeks of basic training his company shunned him, his noncoms hated him and his officers, in order to reduce the wear and tear on their sanity often pretended he did not exist. From time to time they faced reality long enough to attempt to have him transferred but regimental headquarters, suspicious of anything that emanated from the "Jonah" company, ignored their pleas. Now in his third week of basic, Wims sat on the front bench in the barrack classroom, an island unto himself. His company, now twenty-two per cent below strength, and the survivors of his platoon, some newly returned from the hospital, were seating themselves so distant from him that the sergeants were threatening to report the company AWOL if they didn't move closer to the lieutenant-instructor.

The lieutenant watched the sullen company reluctantly coagulating before him and inquired facetiously of the platoon sergeant, "Prisoners of war?"

"No such luck," the sergeant replied grimly.

"Be seated, men," the lieutenant addressed the company. Misinterpreting the resentment of the recruits, he decided a bit of a pep talk was in order. "I know a lot of you are wondering why you're in the Army in the first place, and secondly, why you should be afflicted with the infantry. As civilians you've probably heard so much about the modern pentomic army with its electronic and atomic weapons and all the yak about pushbutton warfare, you figure the infantry is something that should be in the history books with the cavalry. O.K., so let's look at the facts. In the forty-five years since World War II, there've been almost as many localized, 'brush fire' wars as the one now

going on in Burma. Sure, there's still a limited use of tactical atomic weapons, but it's still the infantry that has to go in and do the winning. So far nobody wants to try for a knockout and go *whoosh* with the ICBM. So no matter how many wheels or rotors they hang on it, it is still the infantry, still the Queen of Battles and you should be proud to be a part of it."

With the exception of one recruit sitting alone on the front bench and leaning forward with eager interest, the lieutenant observed that his captive audience was utterly unimpressed with his stirring little "thought for today." He knew he could find more *esprit de corps* in a chain gang. He shrugged and launched his scheduled lecture.

"Because of the pentomic army's small, mobile and self-sufficient battle groups and the very fluid nature of modern warfare the frequency of units being surrounded, cut off and subsequently captured is very high. As early as thirty years ago, in the Laotian War, the number of prisoners taken by all sides was becoming increasingly unmanageable and so the present system of prisoner exchange was evolved. At the end of every month an exchange is made; enlisted men, man for man; officers, rank for rank. This is an advantage for our side since, generally, except for the topmost ranks, no man is in enemy hands over thirty days. This makes any attempts to brainwash the enlisted men impracticable and a great deal of pressure is thereby removed.

"So, if you're taken prisoner, you have really nothing to worry about. Just keep your mouth shut and sit it out till the end of the month. The only information you're require to give is your name, rank and serial number. There are no exceptions. Don't try to outsmart your interrogator by giving false information. They'll peg you right away and easily trick you into saying more than you intend. Now you'll see a film which will show you the right and wrong way to handle yourself during an interrogation and a lot of the gimmicks they're liable to throw at you in order to trick you into shooting off your mouth." The isolated and unnaturally attentive Wims again caught the lieutenant's eye. "You there!" he said, pointing to Wims, "come help me set up this screen."

Wims rose to his feet and one of the platoon sergeants leaped forward. "I'll help you sir. Wims, sit down."

"I asked this man to help me, sergeant."

"But sir—"

Another platoon sergeant and a corporal were already on the platform. They had seized the stand and were unfolding it. The lieutenant spun around. "What are you *doing?*"

"We're helping, sir," the sergeant said.

"Well, cut it out. You noncoms are too officious and it's unnatural. It makes me nervous."

Wims was now on the platform and had taken hold of the screen cylinder. One of the corporals was tugging at the other end, trying to get it away from him.

"Let go of that screen," the lieutenant roared at the corporal. Wims, misunderstanding, released the cylinder a fraction of a second before the corporal did and the corporal went tumbling backwards, knocking the lieutenant off the platform and demolishing the loud-speaker.

The top sergeant raced outside and found one of the company lieutenants. "Sir, you'd better move the company out of the building right away!"

"Why?"

"It's Wims. He's being helpful again."

The lieutenant paled and dashed inside. He took no time to determine the specific nature of the commotion which was shaking the building. He managed to evacuate the company in time to prevent serious casualties when the structure collapsed.

Captain Aronsen, the company commander, faced two of his lieutenants. "You're not telling me anything new," he said wearily. "I know all about Wims. I've tried everything to get him discharged, honorably and otherwise. I've spent a lot of time setting things up so he could hardly help but foul up and we could bounce him, but what happens? Everybody else fouls up and he stays clean. And as if that isn't enough to worry about, headquarters has notified me that General Harmon B. Fyfe of the General Staff will come down from Washington tomorrow for a tour of

this post. He'll visit the bivouac area and observe the tactical exercises. As you know, gentlemen, tomorrow is the final day of the two-week bivouac for this company which completes their sixteen-week basic training program. We'll have the usual company combat exercise which will involve the attack, capture and defense against counterattack of Hill Ninety-three."

"The same as always," said one of the lieutenants.

"It won't be the same as always!" the captain said, banging his fist on his desk. "The area of action, the battle plan may be the same but this time we've got General Fyfe as an observer and Dolliver Wims as a participant and, if I can manage to squeeze the day successfully past that Scylla and Charybdis, I'll promise not to devour any more second lieutenants between meals."

"Sir," offered one of the lieutenants, "why don't we put Wims in the hospital just for tomorrow. It would be simple to arrange—say, an upset stomach."

The captain looked sadly at his junior officer. "It's the only hospital we have," he said. "Besides, I have a better idea. I'm detaching Wims from his platoon and will keep him with me at the company command post as a messenger and I'll shoot the first man who attempts to use him as a messenger or anything else."

"Hah! No need to worry about that, sir. Wims may have us a little shook up but he hasn't flipped us yet."

"I hope we can all say that when tomorrow ends," the captain said fervently.

The company command post had been set up under a cluster of dispirited pines obviously suffering from tired sap but in spite of the ragged shade they provided against the mild, mid-morning sun, Captain Aronsen was perspiring excessively and becoming increasingly unsettled. He glanced uneasily over at the somewhat planetary bulk of General Fyfe surrounded by his satellite colonels and other aides, and muttered to his lieutenant, "If Old Brassbottom came down here to observe the exercise, then why the devil doesn't he go over to the hill and observe instead of hanging around here like a sword of Demosthenes?"

"I think you mean Damocles, captain," the lieutenant corrected. "Demosthenes was the orator."

Aronsen looked sourly at the lieutenant. "I know what I'm talking about. Fyfe has only to say the word and off come our heads."

The lieutenant lowered his voice. "I don't like the way he keeps looking at Wims. Do you think he's heard about him?"

"In Washington?"

"You know how rumors travel in the Army."

"Rumors, yes," the captain said, "but the truth can't even limp out of the orderly room." He wiped his brow and shot a venomous glance at Wims. He said to the lieutenant, "I don't like Wims sitting there in full

view of the general. Go tell him to take his comic book and sit on the other side of the tree."

At that moment one of the young trainees stumbled into the headquarters area bleeding profusely from a deep gash on his cheek. Between lung-tearing gasps he told how the machine gun, intended to serve as the base of fire for the attacking platoons, had been captured by a Red patrol before it could be set up. They were being led off under the supervision of a referee when he tumbled into a ravine and in the confusion made good his escape.

"Get the jeep and rush this man to the hospital," the captain instructed the lieutenant.

"What about the attack?" the lieutenant inquired. "Someone will have to get word to the forward platoons to hold up until we can move up a new gun."

"I'll send a messenger."

"But they're all out."

"One of them is bound to return soon. If not, I'll—"

"What is the matter with that man sulking behind that tree?" boomed General Fyfe who had been listening since the trainee had blurted his story.

The lieutenant snatched the bleeding recruit's arm and bolted for the jeep.

"Hey, lieutenant, take it easy," the trainee complained, "you're pulling my arm off!"

Ignoring him, the lieutenant was absorbed in desperate calculation. "The base hospital is about twelve miles from here," he muttered as they ran. "We should be safe enough there."

"But, general," the captain was protesting, "that man is the company snafu. He means well but he was designed by nature to foul things up."

"I won't buy that, captain," the general said forcefully. "If a man has the right attitude and still doesn't measure up then it's the fault of the people who are training him." There was a mark of menace in the general's voice as he said, "Do you read me?"

"Like the handwriting on the wall," the captain said resignedly. He glanced at the tree behind which, he knew, doom sat reading a comic book.

"Give the man a chance to redeem himself and I'm certain he'll come through with flying colors. I'll give you the opportunity to prove it to yourself." The general turned and bellowed at the tree, "Soldier! You! Private Wims! Come over here!"

Wims scurried over to the general and snapped a salute. The general flicked his hand in return. "Wims, your commanding officer has an important mission for you."

Wims turned to his captain, his face alight. He braced and saluted smartly.

"Wims," the captain said, "I want you to take a message to the lieutenant in command of the first, third and fourth platoons now in the jump-off area. Do you understand so far?"

Wims nodded. "Tell the lieutenant there's been a delay in the attack plan. He's not to move out until he sees a white signal flare fired from the spur of woods on his left. Have you got that?"

Wims nodded emphatically, "Yes, suh!"

"Repeat the message."

"Ahm to tell the lieutenant there's been a change in plans an' he's not supposed to move until a white flare is shot outta the woods on his left flank."

The captain exploded. "Delay, not change! And I didn't say anything about a left flank! The woods on his left flank and the spur of woods on his left that stick out a hundred yards beyond his present position are two different things! So help me, Wims, if you get this message fouled up, I'll use you as a dummy for bayonet practice."

Wims squirmed unhappily. "Couldn't you write it down, suh?"

"Why? So you can get captured and—"

The general interposed. "Even if the message is a bit garbled the intent should be obvious to the lieutenant if he has any intelligence."

The captain regarded the general balefully and then snapped at Wims, "What are you waiting for? Move out! ON THE DOUBLE!"

Wims trotted away and as soon as he was out of sight the general said abruptly to Aronsen, "I'm going over to the Red lines and watch your Blue attack from there."

*Sure,* the captain snarled inwardly, *now that he's set the fuse he's running for the hills.*

The general climbed into his command car and waited while one of his majors dashed into the woods along the path that led to the attack group's staging area. Less than a minute later he returned, followed by a colonel. They jumped into the command car which roared off immediately. As the captain was trying to puzzle out the incident's meaning, three of his runners came out of the woods along the same path.

"Where have you goldbricks been? You should've been back long ago!"

"Sir," one of them spoke up, "there was a colonel a little way back there wouldn't let us pass. Said the gen'ral was havin' a secret conf'rence and for us to wait."

The captain tucked away the strange information for later consideration. Right now there was no time to be lost. "You! Get over to the attack group and tell the lieutenant in command to hold up until a white flare is fired from the spur of woods on his left. All other orders remain the same. If Wims has already been there, the lieutenant is to disregard any message Wims might have given him. If you see Wims, tell him to get back here. All right, move out!

"You! Get over to the second platoon in the reserve area and tell them to rush a replacement machine gun with support riflemen to the tip of the spur; base of fire to be maintained twenty minutes. Signal end of firing with white flare."

The captain dispatched his last runner with additional tactical revisions and then took time to consider the odd fact that the general had one of his colonels delay his messengers. Was he only testing his ability to improvise? Yet he seemed unduly anxious to have him use Wims. Why? Suddenly, into his mind flashed the scene of the general calling Wims from behind the tree and he knew what it was that had been screaming for attention at the back of his mind these last hectic minutes. *No one had mentioned Wims' name within earshot of the general and yet Fyfe had called Wims by name!*

Wims had not been included in the company briefing and he wished he had had the courage to ask the captain where the jump-off area was, but the captain had been so angry with him he had not wanted to provoke him further. After a while of wandering he came upon two of his own company's flank pickets nested in a deadfall a short distance beyond the edge of the woods. They greeted him with hearty hostility. "Git outta here, Wims. You ain't got no business here."

"But Ah'm lookin' fer the lieutenant. Ah got a message fer 'im from the captain."

"He's over there on that hill," one of them replied, spitefully indicating the hill occupied by the Red force.

"Thanks," Wims said gratefully and in all innocence headed for the enemy hill. He lost his bearings in the woods and when he finally came upon the hill he had made a wide swing around the left flank and was approaching its rear slope. Immediately he was spotted by several trainees of the defending force foxholed on the lower slope. Since he came so openly from their rear area and alone, they assumed he was one of their own men.

As they let him come within challenging distance, they saw, pinned to his tunic, the green cardboard bar that identified him as a messenger. The bars were worn so that noncoms wouldn't be snatching for other duties, messengers idling between missions. As had always been done, both sides in this exercise were using the same device to identify their messengers, never expecting them to be delivering messages behind enemy lines.

The challenged Wims explained his mission and he was passed through with the information that most of the junior officers were on the forward slope. Wims climbed up the hill, inconspicuous among others scurrying about on various missions, many of whom did not wear the identifying red armband of the defenders.

He reached the crown of the wooded hill without finding a second lieutenant who was not a referee. He had almost reached the bottom of the forward slope when a small bush jumped up and yelled, "Hey, jerk! Why'n't ya watch where ya goin'?"

Wims pulled back just in time to avoid falling into a well camouflaged machine-gun nest. One of the foliage-

covered gunners, thinking Wims was about to topple on him, jumped aside. His ankle twisted under him and he fell, catching the barrel of the machine gun just under the edge of his helmet and sagging into unconsciousness.

A platoon sergeant heard the steely clatter and rushed over. "That's funny," he growled ominously, "I coulda sworn I set up a machine-gun emplacement here but it's makin' noises like a boiler factory."

The assistant gunner pointed to the unconscious gunner. "He fell an' hit his head. He's breathin' but he ain't movin'."

The chattering of a machine gun from the woods opposite the hill was noted by the sergeant and he knew the Blues would be coming soon. He turned to the gunner. "Get up the hill an' snag one of our looeys or a referee. Tell 'im we got a man hurt here, needs lookin' at."

The gunner dashed off and the sergeant jerked his thumb at Wims. "You! Get on that gun!"

"But Ah got an important message fer the lieutenant," Wims protested.

The sergeant, annoyed, glanced at the green bar. "What lieutenant?"

"The captain said the lieutenant in charge."

"Gimmee the message. I'll tell 'im."

Wims started to protest but the sergeant's eyes crackled. "Well, the captain said fer the lieutenant not to move out 'til he saw the white flare fired outta the woods on his left."

"Not to move out?" the sergeant echoed doubtfully. "That don't sound right. Are ya sure he didn't say not ta *fire* until we saw the white flare?"

"Maybe that's it," Wims said agreeably.

"Maybe!" the sergeant roared, "whaddaya mean, maybe?" He grabbed Wims by the collar and pushed his face against the boy's as if he were about to devour him. "Is it YES or NO?"

"Y-yes," Wims agreed nervously.

"What's your name, soldier?" the sergeant asked.

"Dolliver Wims."

"You don't happen to be a gen'ral do ya?"

Wims looked confused. "No," he ventured.

"Well then say so!" the sergeant screamed.

"Ah'm not a gen'ral," Wims said, desperately trying to please.

"Are ya tryin' ta get wise with me? WHAT IS YOUR RANK?"

"Private."

"Now, what's your name, soldier."

Wims finally understood. "Private Wims, Dolliver."

"That's better." The sergeant's eyes narrowed as he searched his memory. I don't r'member seein' ya 'round this company before."

"Ah don't recall seein' you 'roun' here either," Wims said in suicidal innocence.

"Y'ARE GETTIN' WISE WITH ME!" the sergeant roared. "I'll take care of ya later." He thrust Wims into the pit with the machine gun. "Now stay there on that gun 'til I

get back. I'm goin' ta find the lieutenant."

Wims squatted behind the gun, squinting experimentally through the sights and swinging the barrel to and fro.

The sergeant returned shortly with the lieutenant. "That's him," he said, pointing to Wims.

The lieutenant glanced at the green bar. "Are you sure you got that message straight?"

Wims looked at the menacing sergeant. "Yes, suh," he said, swallowing.

"Somebody is crazy," the lieutenant muttered. "Sergeant, tell Lieutenant Haas to cover my platoon. I'm going back to the CP to see Captain Blair about this message. I'll try to be back before the attack starts to either confirm or cancel the order, but, if not, Haas is to hold his fire until he spots the white flare, or the Blues are right on top of us; whichever happens first."

The lieutenant hustled up the hill and the sergeant went off to find Lieutenant Haas, leaving Wims alone with the machine gun and the still unconscious gunner. The distant machine-gun firing had stopped and the white smoke of a screen laid down by the Blue attackers started scudding thickly across the face of the hill, hiding them as they charged.

"Pickets are back," the sergeant yelled at Lieutenant Haas. "The Blues've crossed the road an' are in the gully at the bottom of the hill."

"How the devil can I possibly see a signal flare through these trees and all this smoke?" Haas muttered to the sergeant. "I think we've got a first-class snafu. Let's go check the machine-gun position; if it's still there."

A whistle sounded and the Blue company surged up out of the ditch and swarmed up the hill. As had been ordered, not a defending shot had yet been fired. Wims opened the breech of the machine gun to see if the ammunition belt was properly engaged. He had a difficult time forcing it open and when he succeeded he found the webbing twisted and a couple of cartridges jammed in at impossible angles. As he was trying to clear it, the unconscious gunner revived, glanced at the advancing Blues and made for the gun which Wims had already commenced to take apart.

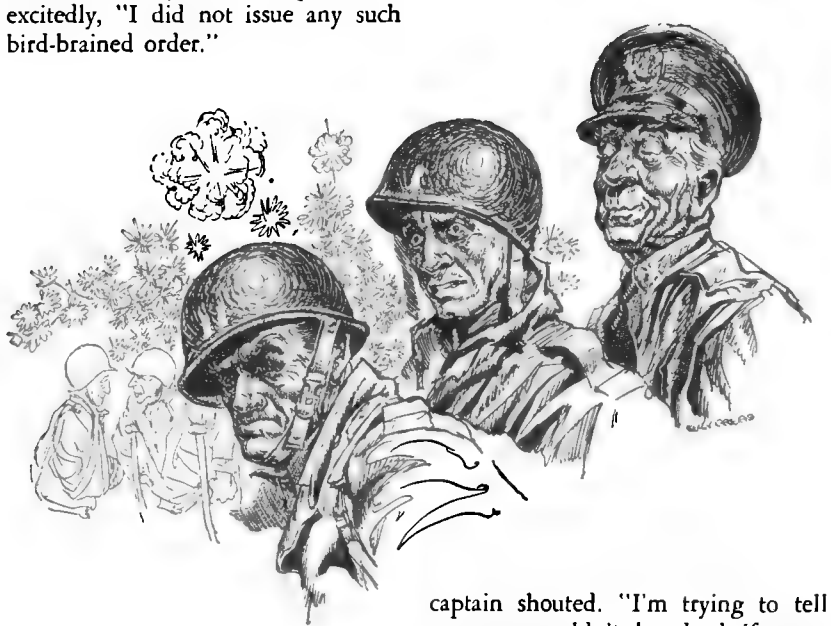
"Whaddaya doin'?" the gunner yelled. He pushed Wims aside, causing him to release his hold on the powerful spring. The bolt shot out of the back of the gun and struck the approaching Lieutenant Haas above the left ear just as he was opening his mouth to give the order to return fire. He fell to the ground with the command unspoken and the sergeant knelt to his aid. At the same moment Wims recognized some members of his platoon charging up the hill and realized for the first time he was behind enemy lines. In sheer embarrassment he slunk away, hoping none of his comrades would notice.

The lieutenant who had gone to confirm Wims' message now came

running down the hill shouting at his men to return fire. He had his captain with a lieutenant aide in tow and when they reached the machine-gun nest and the fallen Haas the lieutenant looked for Wims.

"I tell you he was here," the lieutenant said. "The gunner and the sergeant can bear me out."

"And I tell you," the captain said excitedly, "I did not issue any such bird-brained order."



A lieutenant referee tapped the captain on the shoulder. "Sir, would you gentlemen please leave the field," he said, indicating the lieutenant, the captain and his aide, the sergeant, the gunner and the unconscious Haas. "You are all dead."

The captain looked around to discover that their little group was the target of the blank fire of several advancing Blue infantrymen. "But we're trying to straighten out a mix-up here," the captain protested.

"I'm sorry, sir, but you're all standing here gossiping in the middle of a battle. Theoretically you are all Swiss cheese. Please leave the area."

"We WON'T leave the area!" the captain shouted. "I'm trying to tell you we wouldn't be dead if some idiot hadn't gotten in here and bollixed up this training exercise and—"

". . . It was a brilliant demonstration of infiltration and diversionary tactics by Dolliver Wims," said General Fyfe, striding forward.

The captain rolled his eyes heavenward in supplication before turning to face the general. "Sir," he inquired acidly, "What *are* dolliver wims?"

"Private Wims is the embodiment of the initiative and resourcefulness we are trying to inculcate in all our soldiers. I observed the entire operation and he has demonstrated a great potential for leadership." Fyfe hesitated and for a moment a shadow of repugnance darkened his features as if, for purposes of camouflage, he were about to perform the necessary but distasteful task of smearing mud over his crisp, shining uniform. "I am recommending Private Wims for a battlefield commission."

"A battlefield commission during a training exercise?" the captain screeched incredulously.

Fyfe looked at him severely. "Captain, if you are unable to communicate except in those high tones, I would suggest a visit to the base hospital for some hormones." The general paused and looked around. "It seems, captain, you've lost the hill." He glanced at his watch. "And in record time, too."

"Sir," the captain said, "I won't accept that. This is a limited training exercise conducted without benefit of full communications, weapons or elaborate tactics. Blue company had no right to send a man behind our lines to—"

"Captain," Fyfe said with annoyance, "you are the most argumentative corpse I have ever encountered. I'm leaving now to get that recommendation off to Washington. In the meantime, have someone tell Captain Aronsen to see that Wims is not assassinated before we get him his lieutenancy."

Lieutenant Wims unfolded out of the jeep into the jungle mud. The driver pointed to a cluster of tents sagging under the weight of the streaming rain. "You'll find Major Hecker in there."

"Thanks fer the ride," Wims said as he wrestled his gear out of the jeep. He located the headquarters tent and an orderly brought him in to the major. "Lieutenant Dolliver Wims reportin' fer dooty, suh," the saluting Wims said crisply.

Major Hecker's hand slid wearily to the vicinity of his fatigued and unshaven face in return salute. "Welcome, lieutenant, to Hlangtan, Burma's foremost nothing." Wims handed his orders to the major who said as he accepted them, "You'll be taking the third platoon of A company. They lost their lieutenant two days ago." The major glanced at the orders and exploded. "What do they mean, 'attached to your command as an observer'? I need a platoon leader! What are you supposed to observe?"

Wims shifted uneasily. "Ah cain't rightly say, suh." The truth of the matter was that Wims didn't really know. His commission had been virtually thrown at him. In Washington he had been vaguely briefed that he was to be sent to the front in Burma on a mission of the utmost importance and not to breathe a word to anyone. It was only when he alighted from the plane in Rangoon that he fully realized that actually no one had breathed a word to him about what exactly he was to do. His orders merely stated that he was to get as

close to the enemy as possible and observe.

The major regarded him nastily. "What's that insignia you're wearing? They look like question marks."

"Ah guess they do," Wims replied unhappily.

"Well are they?" the major inquired with a soft shout.

"Ah guess they are, suh."

"You guess!" The major now regarded him with open animosity. "And I suppose you don't know what they stand for."

"Well, suh, Ah tried to find out but somehow Ah couldn't get a straight ansuh."

"O.K., O.K., Lieutenant Cloak and Dagger, but if you don't want questions why wear the things? If the Commies know you're a special and catch you—"

"But Ahm not no special nuthin'. Ahm jus'—"

"Yeah, sure." The major poked a grimy finger at the paper before him and grinned almost savagely. "It says here you're to operate with our most forward units. That's just fine. I've got a patrol going out tonight. They will take you close enough to sit in their ever-lovin' yellow laps."

As Wims was leaving the major suddenly called after him. "Say, lieutenant, since you're some kind of special agent you probably have an 'in' at the Pentagon. Will you pass the word that I need a looey replacement? One that doesn't wear punctuation marks."

The patrol had not been out twenty minutes before it fearfully decided it had better ditch this boy lieutenant who, with each step, sounded as if he were setting off a room full of mousetraps. At a whispered signal from the sergeant in command, the patrol slid noiselessly off the trail and dropped to the ground as the groping Wims went clattering by in the darkness. Within the hour Wims tripped over a Chinese patrol that lay cowering in the ferns as it listened apprehensively to what it thought was an approaching enemy battalion.

The next several days were confusing ones for Wims. With little food or sleep he was hustled from place to place and endlessly questioned by officers of increasing rank. He was passed up to the divisional level where he was briefly interrogated by a Russian officer-advisor to the Chinese headquarters. There seemed to be some disagreement between the Russian and Chinese officers concerning Wims and they were almost shouting when he was pulled from the room and thrown back into his cell.

In the chill, early hours of the following morning he was yanked out of an embarrassing nightmare where he dreamed he went to a hoedown in his briefs. He was squeezed between two furtive men into a shade-drawn limousine with unillumined headlamps and after a frenzied ride the vehicle screeched to a halt. He heard a roaring and in the darkness he was dimly aware that he was being shoved into an airplane. After that he was

certain of nothing as he plunged gratefully back into sleep.

Wims was back at the hoedown only this time without even his brief. And all the interrogators had stopped dancing and were circled around him, glaring and demanding to know what he was hiding. As they closed in upon him he was snatched from the dream by two guards who prodded him out of his cell, down a bleak corridor and into a large room. The windows were hidden by drawn, dark-green shades and two low-hanging, unshaded electric-light bulbs provided a harsh illumination. The chamber was sparsely furnished with a splintered desk, several battered chairs and half a dozen Russian MVD officers.

A man, so thick and heavy in appearance and movement that he was obviously a concrete abutment come to life, stepped up to Wims. The man's stony visage cracked in a slow, cold smile as he rumbled in English, "Welcome to Moscow, Lieutenant Dolliver Wims. I am Colonel Sergei Bushmilov. I am your friend." The word "friend" sounded rather squeaky as if it had not been used in years and needed oiling.

Wims glanced around the room. These people were like unshielded reactors throwing off hard radiations of hostility. "Ah sure could use a friend," he said with utmost fervency.

"Good!" said Bushmilov. "There are some things I wish to know and you are going to tell to me because we are friends."

"Ah kin only give you mah name, rank an' serial number, suh." Wims saw the colonel's face harden and his fist clench. Just then a burst of angry shouting and scuffling erupted in the corridor. Suddenly the door was flung open and half a dozen Chinese stormed into the room trailing a couple of protesting Russian guards. Two of the Chinese were civilian attachés from the embassy and the remainder were uniformed, military intelligence officers.

Bushmilov whirled and immediately recognized the foremost man. "Colonel Peng! What are you doing here?" he exclaimed in startled surprise.

Colonel Peng replied in an askew English, the only language he had in common with Bushmilov. "Our American lieutenant, you kid-stolen." He pointed at Wims.

Bushmilov unconsciously shifted his bulk to blot Wims from Peng's view. "You are wrong Colonel Peng. Your intelligence was not getting nowhere with him and we are having more experience in these matters. We think you approve to take him to Moscow."

"Ah. Yes? Then why you sneak away like folding Arabian tent? Ah!"

Although Bushmilov did not comprehend what Arabian tents had to do with this business he did understand the accusation. Before he could reply, Peng continued. "Us Chinese not fool, Comrade Colonel. You Russian think us not good like

u, like smart. O.K. Us not b'long ıssia like sat'lite. Us b'long us. Us ıt let you take what you want and ı asking. You will give it back, the merican officer. Us can make him y secret."

Bushmilov stiffened and dropped l pretense at cordiality. "Us will—" e shook his head in annoyance. "I .ll not do that without order from y superior, Minister Modrilensky. ow you will be kind to leave. There business to finish."

"No go unless us take officer."

An angry Bushmilov strode to the ıor and snarled at the two guards Russian. One of them dashed ıay down the corridor. "We shall e," Bushmilov sneered at Peng.

"Yes us shall, ah!" said Peng, thdrawing his automatic pistol ɔm its holster. The other Chinese d the same and their movement was plicated immediately by the Rus-ns.

No one moved or spoke further til five Russian security guards rst into the room with submachine ns at the ready. The corporal in arge looked to Bushmilov for in-uctions. The Russian colonel look-long and thoughtfully at the imed Chinese. He had not expected em to go to this extreme. Perhaps ey were only bluffing but one sud-n misinterpreted movement or the ong word and another ugly inci-nt in an already dangerously long ain might be created to accelerate e deteriorating Sino-Soviet rela-ns. Without specific instructions he red not take the responsibility for any untoward action. Bushmilov ordered the guards to stand at ease and dispatched one of his henchmen to notify his superior of the crisis.

"You being very wise, Comrade Colonel," Peng said.

"You are being very annoying," Bushmilov snapped.

"O.K., yes," Peng replied. "Chinese People's Republic ambassador now at Kremlin demand give back American officer. Come soon now, us go. Take lieutenant. You annoying finish. Ah!"

Bushmilov spoke sharply to his junior officers who still stood with drawn pistols. One of them came over and stationed himself alongside Bushmilov. He explained to Peng, "I go on with questioning. My men will shoot anyone who interfere."

Colonel Peng knew his bounds. "O.K., yes. Us wait when order come you give us lieutenant. Us stay. Listen."

Bushmilov turned to Wims. "You are captured six days before. Two weeks from now at this month end you suppose to be exchange by Geneva Concordat number seventeen. Now you tell to me why your government in such a hurry they can not wait and why they make special request to government of Chinese People's Republic for immediate return of you. And why is it offered, twelve Chinese officers, all ranks, to get back only you?"

"Ah don't know, suh," Wims said in honest surprise.

"I warn you. If you not co-operating, you not go home at month end.

You cannot pretend with us. We check and know much about you. You go in army three month before now. No university education, no military experience and now you are second lieutenant so quick. How so?"

"Oh, Ah kin tell y'all that," Wims said with relief. "That ain't no mil'-t'ry secret. When we was havin' basic trainin' this here gen'ral allowed as to how Ah did some right smart soldierin' durin' maneuvers an' he up an' give me a battlefield commission."

Bushmilov's eyes were slits. "Ha. Ha. Ha," Bushmilov said without a smile. "You Americans, always making joke. I enjoy that good laugh. Now we are serious. It is true, yes, that you are intelligence officer sent to Burma with special mission? We know everything," Bushmilov lied, "but we want you say it with your words the few details."

"Cain't tell you nuthin' cause they ain't nuthin' to tell, Ah mean!"

Bushmilov swung up his arm to strike Wims across the face. His hand smacked against the pistol held by the Russian officer standing next to him. The gun went off. The bullet zipped through the window, across the courtyard, into another office and past the nose of Minister of Internal Security, Modrilensky.

Modrilensky shouted for his guards while his aide pointed out the window and yelled, "The shot came from Bushmilov's office. See! The glass is broken in his window!"

Modrilensky paled. "Bushmilov? My truest comrade? Who is there to trust? This I expect from that filthy plotter, Berjanian! Or that sneak, Lemchovsky, or Kamashev. And Gorshkinets and that babyface, Konevets; they do not fool me, I assure you! They would all like to denounce me and steal my job! And the others! I know them all, every last one of them and I'll deal with them, they'll see! But Bushmilov!"

Several guards with submachine guns burst into the room. "Those windows!" Modrilensky screamed. "Shoot them! Kill the deviationist plotters!"

The guards were uncertain which windows Modrilensky was indicating with his wildly waving arms but they had no intention of risking the displeasure of the top man of the MVD. They tentatively sprayed all the windows around the courtyard with bullets and when they received no censure from their chief they went at it with gusto. Modrilensky was too busy shouting orders to other guards to give them any further attention. The sound of the firing was assurance enough that his orders were being obeyed. By the time he had dispatched men to get Bushmilov and neutralize other potential plotters the occupants of most of the offices overlooking the courtyard were crouched at the windows, shooting indiscriminately at each other.

"I can't believe it about Bushmilov," Modrilensky shouted to his aide over the din.

"You know he was at the Kremlin yesterday with Shaposnik," the aide

shouted back. "And you know how close Shaposnik is to the Premier. Maybe they have discovered our plan and Bushmilov, as your successor, was ordered to liquidate you!"

Modrilensky slapped his forehead. "Of course! We must act at once! Send our man to Marshal Mazianko and tell him it is time. He must get his trusted troops into the city before the others suspect what is happening, especially that Kamashev."

Major Kamashev of the MVD put in a hasty call to the Minister of Transport. "I am forced to phone because of a sudden emergency. Modrilensky must have gotten wind of our plans. His men are besieging my office. You must get General Kodorovich to move his men into the city at once! And watch out for the Foreign Minister. I think he and Lemachovsky are up to something."

Major Lemachovsky of the MVD was listening to the Foreign Minister. "The Premier has ordered the arrest of the Minister of Heavy Industry for plotting with General Plekoskaya to bring in troops to seize the government. As soon as General Zenovlov arrives with his troops and we are in control, I will teach these vile counterrevolutionaries that they cannot plot against the party and the people with impunity! And be careful! I think the Minister of Hydroelectric Power is involved with your Colonel Berjanian."

Colonel Berjanian of the MVD was shouting into the phone. "Why can't I get the Minister of Hydroelectric Power? If you don't want a vacation in Siberia, you had better get my call through!"

"I'm sorry, Comrade Colonel," the harried operator whined, "but it isn't my fault. Can I help it if all of Moscow decides to use the telephones all at once? The lines are still tied up. I will keep trying, Com—"

Berjanian slammed down the phone just as an aide rushed in. "Colonel, I have good news! Our men have gained control of most of the immediate hallway and we have captured the lavatory from Captain Konevets!"

"Wonderful!" Berjanian beamed as he hastily left the room.

General Kodorovich's command car rattled and bounced along the rough shoulder of the highway past his stalled 71st Motorized Infantry Division. He found the van of his column tangled with the rear of the 124th Armored Division under General Plekoskaya. Kodorovich sought out Plekoskaya and found him at table under some trees having a fine lunch.

"Would you mind getting your army out of the way," General Kodorovich said to General Plekoskaya. "I have emergency orders to proceed immediately to Moscow."

"So have I," Plekoskaya replied, wiping his lips. "Won't you join me for lunch?"

"I haven't time!" Kodorovich snapped, glaring accusingly at the roast fowl and wine on the white linen.

"Oh but you have, my dear Ko-

dorovich," Plekoskaya said pleasantly. "You see, neither of us is going anywhere for the moment. There's a brigade of the 48th blocking the road ahead."

"The 48th from Kiev?" Kodorovich exclaimed. "What is a brigade of the 48th doing up here?"

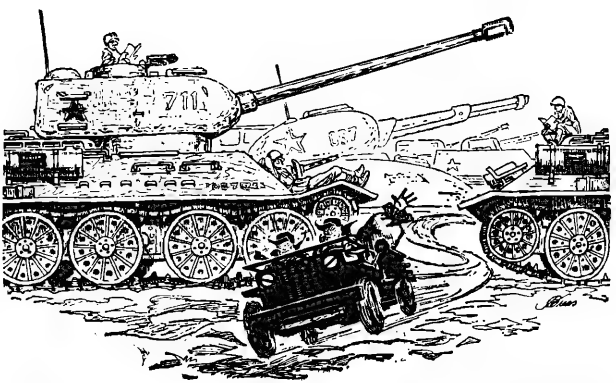
"Looking for its sister brigades from which it was separated when the 116th Mechanized, in its hurry to reach Moscow, cut through their column."

"The 116th Mechanized?" Kodorovich exclaimed again. He wanted to stop talking in questions but all this was coming so fast and unexpectedly.

"Don't even inquire of me about them," Plekoskaya said, shuddering. "They are so disorganized and tangled with two other armored divisions whose designations I don't even know. It all happened because they were trying to outrace each other to the trunk highway and they arrived at the intersection almost simultaneously. You can't possibly imagine the hideous clatter when you have two stubborn armored divisions and an obstinate mechanized one all trying to occupy the same road at once. I could hear it all the way back here." Plekoskaya belched delicately. "General, do wash off the dust of the road and join me at table."

"No thank you. If that's all the delay is, it should be cleared soon and we'll be moving again. I'll want to be with my division."

"General Kodorovich, you evidently don't understand what has happened. The word that has been passed from the most forward units, which are in the city itself, to the rear ones, indicates that Moscow is the hub of one vast military traffic jam thirty to



perhaps fifty miles deep and growing worse all the time as new groups are moving in."

"But I must get to the city," Kodorovich insisted. "I have orders to surround the Kremlin, seal off MVD headquarters and—"

"Ease your mind," Plekoskaya interrupted. "The Kremlin is well surrounded. General Smolledin is deployed around the walls; General Alexeiev is deployed around General Smolledin; General Paretsev is deployed around Alexeiev and so on to the outskirts of the city. Those of us out here, of course, cannot deploy off the roads, for, who knows, tomorrow the Minister of Agriculture may be Premier and he may not take it kindly if we trample the collectives."

"How can you just sit there and do nothing when the people's government is in some kind of danger?" Kodorovich said with some heat.

"It is very simple," Plekoskaya said with mild irritation and sarcasm. "I merely bend at the knees and hips and have a lunch of a weight adequate enough to keep me from floating off my chair and rushing about seeking trouble. Of course it takes years of experience to learn how to do this and most important, *when*." In kindlier tones Plekoskaya continued. "Whatever it is that is happening in the Kremlin and the other hotbeds of intrigue will have to happen without us. There is no telling who, if anyone, is in control. Conflicting orders have been coming over the military radio depending upon which clique controls which headquarters. Why do you know, my dear Kodorovich, already this morning the 124th has alternately been ordered to march to Moscow and a dozen other places including downtown Siberia."

Kodorovich did not smile at Plekoskaya's slight humor. He was squinting anxiously through the bright sunlight at the immobile column of men and vehicles jammed along the road into the far, blue distance.

Plekoskaya took a sip of wine. "There is obviously some kind of political readjustment going on within the government and the unpleasant thing about these little disturbances is that one can never be certain who will emerge to inform the people that he is their unanimous choice for leader. So don't be in so much of a hurry to rush off to Moscow to commit yourself. You might pick the wrong one."

Kodorovich shrugged and sat down at the table. "Perhaps you are right. Do you have any idea who is involved this time?"

"Who isn't involved?" Plekoskaya snorted. "You and I know, as sensible men must, that in our milieu there are at any given moment thousands of intrigues and plots and counterplots simmering away in the Party halls, the ministries, the barracks and anywhere else you care to look. Of course it is treason, don't misunderstand, general, but most of it is really quite harmless. It is the national pastime of the power elite; a sort of political mah-jongg and most of these little bubbling kettles cool and sour

from inaction. However, this time, it is evident that some drastic catalyst has caused a most violent reaction of these subversive ingredients and the incredible, one in a million possibility has occurred. All the pots are suddenly, all at once, boiling over . . . erupting into action!

"By the way," Plekoskaya continued with a smile, "you might be interested to know that when I reach Moscow I am supposed to relieve you of command of the 71st and place you under arrest for unsocialistic activities."

Kodorovich, looking dazed, took a glass of wine. "Who signed your orders?"

"Major Lemchovsky of the MVD."

Kodorovich smiled for the first time since they had met under the trees. "I have orders for your arrest also, to take effect when we reach Moscow; signed by Major Kamashev, MVD."

"I'm sorry," Plekoskaya said, "but you will have to wait your turn. The commanders of the 116th and the 48th are both ahead of you."

Kodorovich suddenly stood up frowning and stared around at the fields where the peasants were working. "I don't like the way those people keep glancing at the troops and snickering. I can hear some of their remarks."

"Don't trouble yourself about it. They've been doing it all morning. It's only good-natured jesting."

"It breeds disrespect of the Army. And disrespect of authority is the first step on the road to anarchy," Kodorovich said severely.

"Well at least that's a movement to somewhere," Plekoskaya said. "Can you blame them for smiling? That's the 124th, the famous 'lightning' division, that's been glued to the road in front of them for the past six hours. In that time it has moved perhaps a hundred or so feet and I suspect it is only because your 71st is very ill-manneredly pushing from behind."

"I still don't like their smirking."

Plekoskaya became suddenly solemn. "It is when they begin to laugh openly that we should become concerned."

"How did you get the American lieutenant out of Moscow?" Colonel Peng's superior was asking him.

"Bushmilov was conducting the interrogation," Colonel Peng replied, "when suddenly somebody started shooting through the window from another office across the way. I heard Bushmilov yell something about plotters and counterrevolutionaries and he and his men started shooting back. Within minutes the entire building was like a battlefield. In the confusion we snatched the American and hustled him away. The corridors were full of groups of MVD men running and shooting and I have no idea what it was all about but whatever it was it didn't affect us for we were allowed to pass unmolested. We managed to escape stray bullets and get out of the building with whole skins to our embassy.

"Getting out of Moscow was the real problem. Within hours the city was clogged with troops. Slowly, as supplies were choked off by the congestion, offices and factories and shops closed down and the people were on the streets strolling about as if on holiday, laughing and joking about the tangle of tanks and vehicles and military equipment that was effectively strangling the city.

"It appears that not even the highest officers and officials were making any effort to clear up the mess. Each one seemed to be afraid to take any responsibility beyond the last coherent orders that had brought practically the entire army converging on Moscow.

"We tried to get out by air but that proved impossible. All civil flights were canceled so that the fields could accommodate the armadas of military aircraft that swarmed into the area. We couldn't even get a wireless message out because of the spreading chaos. We had to proceed out of the city on foot and by then affairs were beginning to take an ugly turn. Food supplies were becoming exhausted and as long as the military refused to budge nothing could be brought in, even their own supplies. Once out of the city we took to the river. No one attempted to stop us but neither did any official attempt to help their Chinese comrades. The curious paralysis had spread. It was as if the entire countryside was holding its breath, waiting for some positive sign of authority. In Gorki, where there was less air congestion, we managed to steal a plane and flew it to Finland. The rest you know."

Peng's superior nodded. "Our Russian friends are losing their grip. That is because they do not practice pure Communism. Upon China now falls the mantle of leadership of the people's republics as we knew, long before, it was destined to be." He rose from behind his desk. "Come, let us now turn our attention to this strange American lieutenant and see how the interrogation is proceeding."

As Peng and his chief stepped into the hallway, they heard a shattering of glass and a cry of pain from a room at the far end of the hallway.

"It sounds like someone falling through a window!" Peng exclaimed.

His chief's face was shadowed with a momentary irritation. "If that is another one of my men having a foolish accident—"

"What do you mean?" Peng inquired.

"Mean?" his chief repeated in exasperation. "I'll tell you what I mean. Since this interrogation started four of my men have injured themselves in silly, stupid accidents; like the captain who fell off his chair and broke his leg. If I didn't know my men, I would swear that they had all been drinking!"

There was a sudden, single shot. They hurried along the hall but before they could reach the room at the end they had to drop to the floor to escape the fusillade of bullets that whined down the corridor.

In the great Operations Room of

the Pentagon, the uppermost echelons of the American General Staff glared at Dr. Titus whose civilian presence was defiling this military "holy of holies."

An admiral, sitting next to General Fyfe, banged his fist on the table and almost shouted at Titus. "So you're one of the idiots who's been advising the President not to let us commit our forces in Afghanistan. Do you realize the Russians will—"

Titus appealed to the Chairman of the General Staff. "Do I or do I not have the floor? Hm-m-m?" Reluctantly, the chairman restored order and motioned Titus to continue. "It is true that the President has been persuaded to not commit the United States to any further military adventures until we have given a plan of mine some little time to take effect. Gentlemen, we have in operation a secret weapon that, if all goes well, will make any future military undertakings unnecessary and bring about the destruction of our enemies." At the mention of "secret weapon," the entire General Staff, excepting Fyfe, creaked forward in their seats with eager interest. "The secret weapon is an eighteen-year-old boy named Dolliver Wims, recently commissioned a lieutenant in the Army and now in Russian hands."

An avalanche of derisive remarks concerning his sanity roared down on Titus but he ignored them and continued. "Wims came to work for us last spring and nothing in his manner or appearance indicated that he was in any way unusual. However, he had hardly been with us a month before complaints from my staff started flooding my office. Our accident rate soared skyward and all staff fingers pointed at Wims. I investigated and discovered that in spite of the accusations Wims was never *directly* involved in these mishaps. He was present when they occurred, yes, but he never pushed or bumped anyone or dropped anything or even fingered anything he wasn't supposed to and yet in the face of this fact, almost everyone, including my most dispassionate researchers, invariably blamed Wims. Finding this extremely odd, I kept the boy on and under various subterfuges I probed, tested and observed him without his knowledge.

"Then one day I became annoyed with him; without just cause I must admit, merely because I was not getting any positive results; and I handled him rather roughly. Within seconds I sliced open a finger. My irritation mounted and later I went to shove him rudely aside and down I went, giving my head a nasty crack on the edge of a lab bench. I felt wonderful as I sat in pain on the floor, sopping the blood out of my eyes. With the blow an idea had come to me and I felt I at last knew what Wims was and the factor that triggered his dangerous potential. For weeks afterward, under carefully controlled conditions, I was as nasty to him as I dared be. It took my most delicate judgment to avoid fatal injury but I managed to document the world's first known *accident prone inducer*. I call him Homo Causaca-

dere, the fall causer, whose activator is hostility.

"We have always had the accident prone, the person who has a psychological proclivity for having more than his share of mishaps. Wims is an individual who can make an accident prone of *anyone* who threatens his well being and survival. This boy, who, as indicated by the tests, hasn't an unkind thought for any creature on this planet, has an unconscious, reactive, invulnerable defense against persons who exhibit even the slightest hostility toward him. The energies of their own hostility are turned against them. The greater the hostility, the more accidents they have and the more serious they become. And the increase in accidents gives rise to an increase in hostility and so it goes in an ever widening circle of dislocation and destruction.

"As a scientist I would have preferred to take the many months, perhaps years, necessary to investigate this phenomenon thoroughly, however these are critical times and I was possessed with an inspired idea on how we might utilize this phenomenon against the enemies of the free world. Through a colleague on the Scientific Advisory Council I got the President's ear and he decided to let us try, on the basis, I'm certain, that the best way to handle screwball scientists is to allow them one or two harmless, inexpensive insanities in the hope that they will make an error and discover something useful.

"Through the good offices of General Fyfe, who was apprised of our plan, Wims was snatched into the Army, commissioned and sent to Burma to be captured. Intelligence advises that he has been taken to Moscow which is for him, an American officer ostensibly on a secret mission, the most hostile environment extant." Titus shook his head. "I suppose I should feel sorry for those poor Russians. They don't have a chance."

"Sorry for them!" Fyfe blustered. "Think what I've had to go through. Those ridiculous orders; couldn't explain to anyone. All my people think that I've lost my mind. Felt like a fool giving that idiot a battlefield commission during a training exercise."

"It was necessary to give him some rank," Titus explained. "The Communists wouldn't expect a private to be sent on a secret mission; they just wouldn't bother to interrogate him. Now an officer, whose return was specially requested the day following his capture would seize their attention and surely they would apply their nasty pressures to find out why. He hasn't been returned through the regular monthly exchange and they even deny having captured him which seems to indicate that the plan is working."

An admiral stirred and shifted under his crust of gold. "How long have they had him?"

"Six weeks."

"And nothing's happened yet," the admiral commented. "My guess is that we could sit here for six years

and nothing would come of such a barnacle-brained scheme."

An Air Force general spoke up in the breezy jargon of the youngest service. "I'm with the old man from the sea on this one," he said as the admiral winced. "I just don't see spending billions for alphabet bombs and then warming our tails on them while these psycho-noseys move in and try to fight these sand-lot wars with voodoo and all that jazz."

An aide hurried in from the adjoining message center and handed the chairman a paper. Everybody waited in silence while the chairman seemed to take an unusually long time to read it. Finally he looked up and said. "This is a special relay from the President's office and since it concerns us all I'll read it aloud." He held the paper up and read, "Apropos of your present conference with Dr. Titus, it may please the General Staff to learn that the Russian Communist Party newspaper, *Pravda,* has just denounced the newspaper of the Red Army, *Izvestia,* as a tool of the decadent, warmongering, capitalist ruling circles of the imperialist Western bloc. Other evidence of severe internal upheaval of a nature favorable to the West is pouring in through news channels and being confirmed by State and CIA sources. Congratulations, Dr. Titus."

Dr. Titus arose with unconcealed triumph. "Gentlemen, apparently my hypothesis is correct. The disintegration that will crumble our enemies has already begun. Our secret weapon is a stunning success!"

The crusted admiral looked sourly at Titus. "Of course you're only assuming that this Wims person is responsible. We'll never really know."

"Why won't we?" Titus demanded. "You speak of him as if he were dead or doomed and I tell you he is no such thing. Don't you understand? He cannot be harmed! And when he gets back here, as he will, he'll tell us himself exactly what and how it happened."

The aide rushed in with another message. "Again from the President," he announced. "It has been confirmed by CIA," he began reading aloud, "that two weeks ago a group of Chinese officials in a Russian aircraft landed at a Finnish airfield. It is now known definitely that an ostensibly ill member of their group who was put aboard their plane in a stretcher was in reality a young American officer. Among other things, this explains the eighteen contradictory Five Year Plans announced by Peiping this week. CIA says they are going the way of the Russians. Again congratulations, Dr. Titus."

"Well, General Fyfe," Titus said, smiling at him, "perhaps you now feel somewhat differently about this Wims business, hm-m-m?"

Fyfe roared, unable to contain himself any longer: "Do you *really* believe that rot you've been feeding us? You have the audacity to credit yourself with the downfall of two powerful nations, even if it does

happen? You think your insane ditherings about an incompetent halfwit has anything to do with anything? You may have bamboozled the President, after all he's only a civilian, but you're not about to fool me! These are perilous times and I have no use for you professors and your crazy, useless theories. Now why don't you get out of here and let us do our job, trying to keep this planet from blowing up in our faces!"

For the first time in his life Dr. Titus flew into an unreasoning fury. How could this fat, uniformed mountain of stupidity still contrive to deny the facts and dare speak to him the way he did? And after what he had just accomplished! His rage boiled over and Titus rushed at Fyfe, his fist already striking ahead. He never touched the general. Unaccountably he got tangled in his own legs and fell heavily to the floor. When he tried to rise hot pain burned in his ankle. He sat there staring up in astonishment at Fyfe, hulking over him.

It had happened so swiftly no one had yet spoken or moved.

"YOU!" Titus screeched incredulously, pointing directly at Fyfe. "You of all people!" And Titus sat there on the floor rubbing his injured ankle and he laughed and laughed till the tears came.

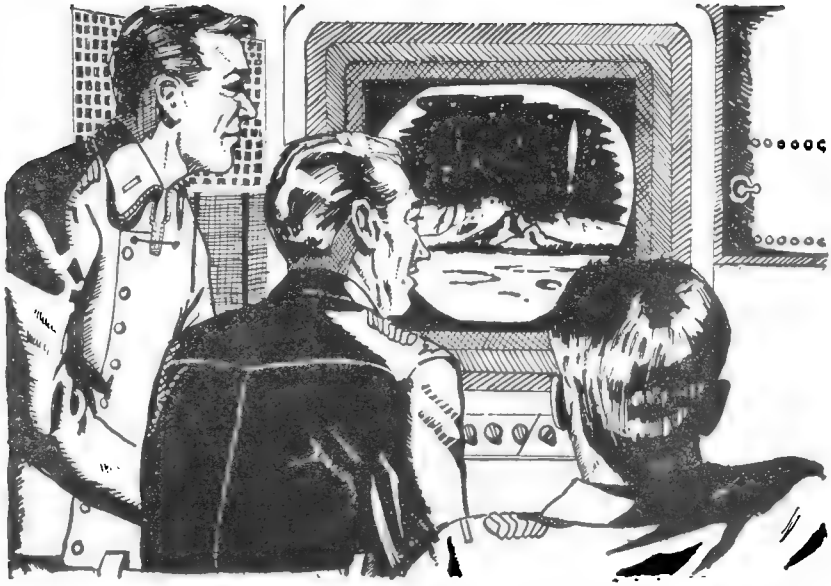
THE END

# THE ANALYTICAL LABORATORY

AUGUST 1959

| PLACE | STORY | AUTHOR | POINTS |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | The Aliens | Murray Leinster | 2.29 |
| 2. | Familiar Pattern | George Whitley | 2.61 |
| 3. | The Outsiders | A. Bertram Chandler | 3.27 |
| 4. | Dead Giveaway | Randall Garrett | 3.69 |
| 5. | Day of Succession | Theodore L. Thomas | 4.15 |

THE EDITOR.



Illustrated by Bernklau

COLONEL Dean Wharton gripped the solido firmly between finger and thumb, and stared into its glossy depths. Color began to rise slowly in his face. The solido showed a spaceship of unmistakably alien design descending, in a landing orbit, toward the surface of the uninhabited planet known in Terran charts as Bartlett V. Bartlett V was a Terran observation outpost. An alien landing on it was an infringement of Terran sovereignty. Colonel Wharton scowled.

Glaring straight into the pale, uneasy face of Lieutenant Crosley,

***No organization can function if a clearly transmitted message cannot produce the intended effect. If, no matter what the order is, it always comes out the same, unwanted way . . .***

# CERTAINTY

## BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

Wharton said, "How long ago was this picture taken?"

"About an hour, sir. But you were in Deepsleep, and we didn't think—"

"No, you didn't think," Wharton said acidly. "O. K., let's have the rest of the story. You sent warnings to the ship, I hope."

Crosley nodded. "We beamed them wide-channel in Terran, General Galactic, Dormirani, Leesor, and Fawd. We sent the same message in each language: telling them that this is a Terran observation outpost, that they can't land here without prior permission, that they would have to depart at once, By this time they had completed their landing. We estimate their position at about one hundred twenty miles northeast of here, on the Creston Plateau."

"And did you get an answer?"

"A few minutes ago. It was in what Breckenridge says is a Fawdese dialect. They said, in effect, that they didn't recognize Terran sovereignty over this planet, for one thing, and for another they had come here to make certain scientific observations. They said they'd leave here in a week or two, after they've completed their observations."

"To which you made what reply?" Wharton said.

Crosley shook his head. "None, sir. I got word that you were coming out of Deepsleep, and so . . ."

". . . And so you passed the buck to me. All right, lieutenant. In your position I'd have done the same thing. Get me Breckenridge."

"Yes, sir."

Lieutenant Crosley performed a smart little salute and about-faced. Alone, Wharton shook his big, shaggy head sadly. This was what came of a century of unbroken Galactic peace. Youngsters like Crosley didn't even know what war meant. And a bunch of aliens thought it could put down on a Terran outpost planet without as much as a by-your-leave. Wharton sighed, feeling his age, admitting to himself that he had hoped to serve out his last few years without incident. He was getting close to the hundred-twenty-five-year mark; mandatory retirement came at age one hundred thirty. And only an hour and a half of Deepsleep every day kept him going now. Well, there was going to be an incident, now, whether he liked it or not. Colonel Wharton straightened his shoulders.

Captain Breckenridge entered the room. The linguistics man was short and stocky, with choppy, irregular features and stubby red hair. "Sir?"

"Breckenridge, you say this alien ship spoke to you in Fawd?"

"A Fawdese dialect, sir."

"That's what I'm getting after. Where is that ship from? The Fawd Confederacy knows better than to plonk a ship down on Terran property. Unless the Fawds are looking to provoke a war, that is."

Breckenridge said, "Oh, these aren't Fawds, sir. They simply speak a Fawdese dialect. Plenty of peoples in the Fawdese sector speak Fawd without belonging to the Confederacy."

"You're stating the obvious," Wharton said irritably. "I want to know where these people are from."

"The best I can give is an educated guess."

"Well?"

"They come from the western tip of the Fawdese lingual sector. That's plain from their shifted vowels. There are three Fawdese-speaking races out that way: the Cyross, the Halivanu, and the Dortmuni." Breckenridge ticked them off on his fingers. "The Cyross aren't a technological people. They wouldn't be sending ships this far for centuries. The Dortmuni are passive-resistance nonbelligerents. *They* wouldn't be looking for trouble either. That leaves the Halivanu as the likely senders of that ship up on the plateau. You know, of course, the legends about the Halivanu—"

"Just legends. That's all they are."

"They've been documented pretty well. It's been proven that—"

*"Nothing's* been proven, Breckenridge! Hear me? Nothing has been proven about the Halivanu." Wharton rose, gripping the edges of his desk. He realized that his legs were quivering. Just to hammer the point across, he said, "I'm not interested in hearing about any strange powers the Halivanu may be thought to have. I'm interested only in getting them off this planet, and getting them off fast. Come on across to the signal

room with me. I'll send these Halivanu packing right now."

There *were* all sorts of legends about the Halivanu, Wharton admitted dourly to himself as he and Breckenridge crossed the clearing and entered the outpost's communications room. Spacemen venturing into the Fawdese sector had brought back stories about mental vampires that could suck a man's mind dry, and similar gory tales. But nothing had ever been proven. The Halivanu were introverted humanoids who had little to do with the rest of the universe, keeping to themselves and seeking no outside contacts. Eerie legends always sprang up about recluses, Wharton thought. He shrugged away his uneasiness. His job was to protect the integrity of the boundaries of the Terran sphere, boundaries which these Halivanu—if they *were* Halivanu—were clearly transgressing.

"Set up contact with that ship," Wharton ordered.

Signalman Marshal acknowledged and began turning dials. After a few moments he looked up and said, "I can't get them to recognize me, sir."

"That's all right. They'll be listening, never worry. Breckenridge, you're better at this dialect business than I'd be. Pick up the mike and tell them that they're trespassing on Terran ground, and that they have exactly . . . ah, make it three hours . . . three hours to blast off. Otherwise we'll be compelled to treat their landing as an act of war."

Nodding, Breckinridge began to speak. Wharton found that he could understand most of what was being said; he knew the basic Fawd tongue, of course, since it was one of the five great root-languages of the galaxy, and the Halivanu language differed from Fawd only in a broadening of the vowels, minor grammatical simplifications, and inevitable vocabulary shifts.

There was silence for a full minute after Breckenridge had finished.

"Repeat it," Wharton said.

Breckenridge recited the ultimatum a second time. Again, the only response was silence. Nearly two minutes ticked by; fidgeting, Wharton was on the verge of ordering yet another repeat when the speaker sputtered and emitted, in a dry, rasping tone, the word, "Eritomor—"

It was the Fawdese for *"Earthmen."* A moment later came more Fawdese words, spoken slowly and carefully. Wharton's face went steely as he listened. The Halivanu spokesman was explaining politely that since the Free World of Halivanth did not recognize the Terran claim to this uninhabited world, there was no reason why the Halivanu ship should leave. However, the Halivanu had no desire to claim the planet for themselves, but they simply wished to carry out certain solar observations over a period of some nine or ten Galactic Standards days, after which time they would be glad to depart.

At the conclusion of the statement, Breckenridge said, "They declare that they don't recognize our claim and—"

Wharton shut him up with an impatient gesture. "I understood the message, lieutenant." He picked up the microphone himself and said, in halting Fawdese, "This is Colonel Dean Wharton speaking. If you want to make solar observations here, you'll have to clear it through regular diplomatic channels. I'm not authorized to grant any landings. And so I have to request that you—"

He was interrupted by a voice from the speaker. *"Eritomor . . . vor held d'chaydu kon derinilak—"*

It was the same speech the Havilanu spokesman had delivered before, repeated in the same slow, flat tone, as though spoken to a wayward child. Annoyed, Wharton waited till the Havilanu was finished, and tried to speak again. But he got no more than a few words out before the Havilanu reply started for the third time.

"It's a tape," Marshall murmured. "They've got the ends looped together and it's going to keep repeating indefinitely."

"Let's monitor it for a while," Wharton said.

They monitored it. After the tenth successive repetition he ordered the signalman to shut down. Nothing was going to be gained through radio ultimatums, obviously. The Havilanu simply would not listen. The only thing to do, clearly, was to send an emissary over to the alien ship to explain things in person. And if that didn't work—

Other steps would be necessary. "Sound a Red Alert," Wharton said. "We'd better start getting this place tightened up for battle. Just in case," he added. "Just in case."

The thirty-seven men of the Bartlett V outpost occupied their battle stations with obvious relish. To most of them, an alien invasion—even an invasion by only one ship—was a pleasant diversion indeed, for men serving a three-year hitch on an empty planet a thousand light-years from home. The break from the usual routine of observation and report-filing was more than welcome.

Colonel Wharton shared none of their delight, though. He was old enough to remember what war was like—as a raw recruit in 2716 he had taken part in the mop-up activities of the Terra-Dormiran conflict, just over a hundred years before. There hadn't been war in the galaxy since. And, inasmuch as there wasn't a man in his outfit older than ninety, none of his men had any real idea of what a galactic war was like. Ships splitting open in midspace like gaffed fish, whole continents leveled in scorched-earth campaigns, an entire generation of young men practically wiped out—no, there was nothing nice about war, from any angle. But maybe a century of peace had caused galactic complacence. Certainly no alien ship would have dared make a landing like this in the last century, Wharton thought. And who could have imagined such a reply to an ultimatum from a Terran commanding officer?

The worst part of the situation was that the responsibility was all his. The quickest subradio message to Earth

would take a month to arrive; a month more would be needed for a reply. If he waited, Terra's territorial integrity could have been violated a dozen times over. So the buck ended with Colonel Wharton. If the Halivanu insisted on remaining, he could choose between blasting them off the planet and probably starting a war, or letting them stay and thereby issuing an open invitation to the entire universe to come trespass on Terran worlds. It wasn't a pretty choice. But there was no one he could go to for advice except men of his own rank, on other outpost worlds, and it was senseless to do that. He would have to make his own decisions.

Breckenridge came up to him as he stood observing the conversion of the outpost to a fort. The post was amply armed, and Wharton held regular artillery drills. But he had never dreamed he would actually be ordering a Red Alert out here on this relatively nonstrategic world.

"Sir?"

"What is it, Breckenridge?"

"I'd like to volunteer for the job of going to see the Halivanu, sir. I think I'm the best fitted man for talking to them."

Wharton nodded. Breckenridge had been his choice; but the man had made matters simpler by volunteering. "Accepted, captain. Order Smithson to break out a jetsled for you. You'll leave at once."

"Any special instructions?"

"Repeat that ultimatum to them, as a starter. Make it clear that we're automatically bound to blast them down if they don't get off here in a couple of hours. Get the point across that we can't help ourselves, that it's our job to destroy any alien ships that make unauthorized landings, and that therefore the responsibility for starting a possible war is all theirs."

"I've got it, sir."

"Good. Don't bluster, don't threaten—just convince them that our hands are tied. Make them see the pickle we're in. I don't *want* to shoot at them, but I will if I have to—and I'll have to if they stay here. Tell them they can make all the solar observations they want if they'll only go through the proper channels."

Breckenridge nodded. There were beads of sweat on his face. He looked troubled.

Wharton said, "You don't *have* to volunteer for this, captain. There are other men I could send if—"

"It's my job. I'm not withdrawing."

"You're worried about those crazy stories you've heard, Breckenridge. I can almost read your mind."

"The stories are . . . nothing but stories, sir," Breckenridge said stolidly. "Just so much jetwash. May I leave, now, sir?"

Wharton smiled. "You're a good man, Breckenridge. Dismissed."

By jetsled it would take more than an hour for Breckenridge to reach the alien spaceship; allow him half an hour for parleying, Wharton thought, and an hour or so to return. Make it three hours round trip. So if Breck-

enridge were successful, the Halivanu ship would be blasting off about the same time that Breckenridge returned to base. *If,* Wharton thought. He stood for nearly half an hour in front of the radar screen, staring at the white blip that represented the Halivanu ship a hundred twenty miles away, and at the tiny white bug racing northeast across the screen that was the reflected image of Breckenridge's sled.

Then he walked away and tried to busy himself in routine activities. But his mind kept going back to the Halivanu incident. He felt very tired. There was nothing he wanted to do more than crawl into the Deepsleep tank and let the cool therapeutic fluids wash over him.

Wharton reminded himself forcibly that he had already taken his Deepsleep time for the day. He rationed it strictly, one session and no more per diem. Which meant he'd have to stay on his pins unaided.

The afternoon shadows lengthened. Bartlett V was a moonless world, and night fell fast. The little sun was dipping rapidly toward the horizon, casting an orange light over the empty, barren plains. The radar screen showed that Breckenridge was now on his way back.

He returned four hours after he had departed. The screen still showed the Halivanu ship on the plateau. The linguist reported immediately to Colonel Wharton.

"Well?"

Breckenridge smiled wanly. "It's all arranged, sir. They'll be leaving next week, as soon as they've completed their observations."

Wharton sat down abruptly. "*What* did you say?"

"I agreed to let them stay, sir."

Wharton felt as though he'd been tomahawked. In a rigidly controlled voice he said, "You agreed to let them stay, Breckenridge? How polite of you! But I thought I sent you there to deliver an ultimatum—not to make agreements."

"Of course, sir. But I discussed it with them and we agreed it would be unreasonable to drive them away before they had finished their observations. They clearly don't mean any harm. They're not even carrying armaments, sir."

"Breckenridge, are you out of your head?" Wharton asked, aghast.

"Sir?"

"How can you stand there and talk such drivel to me? Your opinion of their harmlessness is irrelevant, and you know it. You were sent bearing an ultimatum. I wanted their reply."

"But we talked it over, sir. It can't hurt us to make a little concession like this."

"Breckenridge, did those aliens drug you? You're talking like a madman. What right did you have—"

"You said yourself that you would rather give in and let them stay than start a war, sir. And since they insisted on staying, I followed your instructions and told them it would be O. K., provided they left when—"

"Followed *my* instructions?" Wharton roared. His hand drummed men-

acingly on the desk top. "When did you ever hear me say such a thing?"

"Why, just before I left," Breckenridge said innocently.

"Now I *know* you're out of your head. I never said a word about granting concessions to them. I told you to let them know that if they weren't off this planet by my deadline I'd be compelled to destroy them. Not a syllable about concessions. And—"

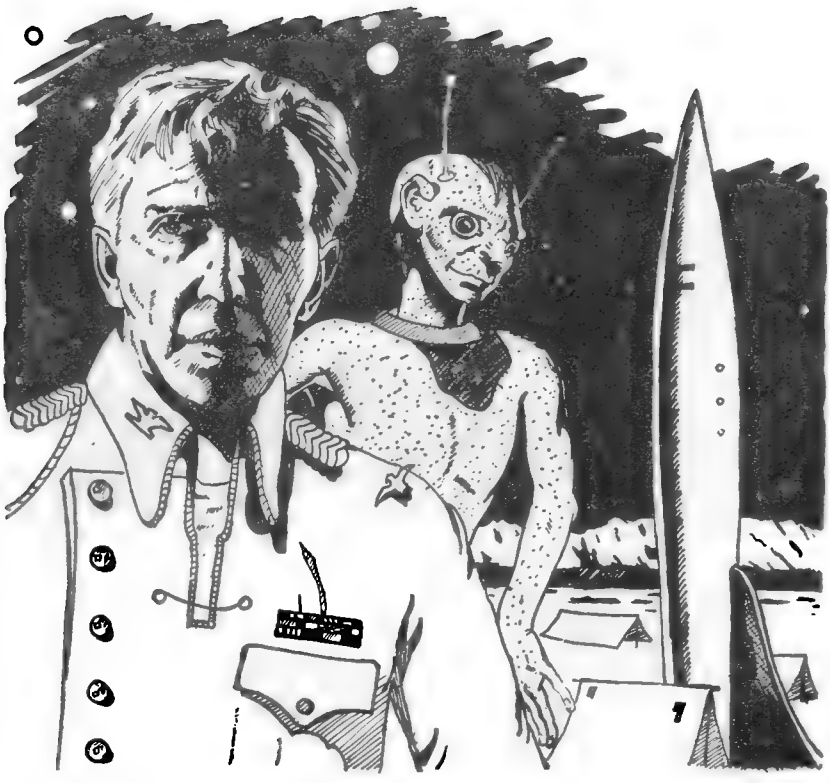
"I beg to contradict you, sir, but—"

Sighing, Wharton rang for his orderly. A moment later the man stuck his head in the door. Wharton said, "Rogers, take Captain Breckenridge to the infirmary and have him detained for a psychiatric examination. And send Smithson to me."

Smithson entered a few minutes afterward. The enlisted man stood diffidently near the door.

Wharton said, "Tell me exactly what transpired between Captain Breckenridge and the aliens."

Smithson shook his head. "Sorry, but I can't, colonel. I didn't go into



the alien ship. Captain Breckenridge wanted me to wait outside in the sled."

Keeping his voice tight, Wharton said: "Oh. In that case you can't help me, Smithson. Dismissed."

"Yes, sir."

Wharton waited until the door closed, and put his head in his hands. His shoulders slumped wearily.

He hadn't given Breckenridge any instructions to parley. Yet the linguist swore up and down that he had. What would make a solid man like Breckenridge snap like that?

Wharton shook his head. They told stories about the Halivanu, vague stories of vaguer mental powers. But that stuff was — Breckenridge himself had put a name to it—jetwash. Wharton was certain of it. In his time he had seen too many legends fade like the dreams they were to be taken in by anything new. Imaginative spacemen *always* attributed mystical powers to little-known races, but such attributions had to be discounted pretty near to one hundred per cent.

Drawing in his breath sharply, Wharton jabbed down on his call-button. The orderly appeared.

"Send me Lieutenant Crosley, quick-quick."

Crosley arrived five minutes later. It was nearly night now. The lieutenant looked paler, less relaxed than ever. He was a recent Academy product, not much past thirty.

Leaning forward, Wharton said, "We've got some complications, lieutenant. Incidentally, I'm making a tape recording of this conversation."

Crosley nodded. "Complications, sir?"

"I sent Breckenridge to the aliens with an ultimatum this afternoon. I wanted him to tell them they had three hours to get off the planet, or I'd open fire. But instead he granted them permission to stay here until they finished their observations, and now he claims he said so on my authority."

"I wondered why he was taken to psych ward."

"Now you know. I don't pretend to understand why he cracked up, Crosley, but I *do* know we've got to send another man to the Halivanu right away, withdrawing Breckenridge's permission and telling them to get moving."

"Of course, sir."

"I'd like you to go, Crosley. Right now. Take one of the enlisted men with you, and make sure you both go into the Halivanu ship. Tell them that the previous messenger was unauthorized, that you're the authorized messenger, that if they don't blast off by sunrise we'll be forced to let them have it."

Crosley looked a little paler, but he remained steady. "I'll leave right away, sir."

"Before you go: repeat the message you're bearing."

Crosley repeated it.

"You won't attempt to negotiate with them, lieutenant. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll deliver the ultimatum and

leave. It isn't essential that you wait around for an answer. If they're still here by morning, we'll blast them."

"Yes, sir."

"You understand what I'm saying now? You won't tell me later that I authorized you to negotiate?"

Crosley smiled. "Of course not, sir."

"Get going, then."

The hours passed. Taps sounded, but Wharton remained awake, pacing his office uneasily. Starlight, bright in the moonless dark, filtered through his windows. Wharton clenched his fists and stared out into the night.

He pitied Breckenridge. It was a hellish thing to lose your grip on actuality. To maintain that something is true when it's flatly false. The psych tests had shown nothing; Breckenridge firmly and positively believed that he had been instructed to parley. Schizophrenia, the psych officer said. But schizophrenia wasn't something a person got suddenly, like a twisted ankle, was it? It was a slowly building pattern of action and belief. And Breckenridge had always seemed one of the most stable men of all.

Inescapably Wharton came to the conclusion that the Halivanu had done something to him. But Breckenridge said they hadn't, and the EEG tests revealed no hint of recent drugging or hypnosis. Not that the EEG was necessarily infallible—

Wharton glowered at his faint reflection in the window. He was *certain* the Halivanu had no mysterious powers. They were just another isolationist race, bent on their own destinies and aloof from the rest of the universe. That was no reason for crediting them with magical abilities.

A light glimmered outside. Wharton heard the roar of the jetsled. Crosley was returning.

Impatiently, Wharton dashed outside. The night air was clear, cold, tangy. Crosley and his driver, an enlisted man named Rodriguez, were getting out of the sled.

They saluted when they saw him. Returning the salute with a shaky arm, Wharton said, "Did you run into any trouble?"

"No, sir. But we didn't find him, either," Crosley replied. "We searched for hours, but—"

"What in the name of the cosmos are you babbling about?" Wharton demanded in a choked voice. "You didn't find *whom?*"

"Why, Breckenridge, of course," Crosley said. He exchanged a puzzled glance with Rodriguez. "We traveled in wide circles just as you said, until—"

Wharton felt dizzy. "What's this about looking for Breckenridge?"

"Didn't you send us out to look for him? He got lost in the plains coming back from his trip to the alien ship, and we were ordered to look for him. Sir? Sir, are you feeling all right?"

Cold fingers seemed to be encircling Wharton's heart. "Come inside with me, lieutenant. You too, Rodriguez."

He led them into his office and played for them the tape he had made

of his conversation with Crosley earlier. The two men listened in growing confusion.

When the tape had run its course, Wharton said, "Do you still maintain that I sent you out to look for Breckenridge?"

"But . . . yes—"

"Breckenridge is asleep in the infirmary. He was never lost. He came back hours ago. I sent you out to deliver an ultimatum. Didn't you recognize your own voice, Crosley?"

"It sounded like me, yes. But . . . I don't remember . . . that is—"

Further questioning led down the same dead end. The tape transcript only bewildered Crosley. He grew paler and paler. He was certain they had merely traveled in wide circles looking for Breckenridge, and Rodriguez backed him up on that. Even when Wharton assured him that he had watched their path on the radar, and they had gone direct to the Halivanu ship and returned straightaway, they shook their heads.

"We never went near that ship, sir. Our orders—"

"All right, lieutenant. Go to bed. You too, Rodriguez. Maybe in the morning you'll have better memories."

Wharton could not sleep. First Breckenridge, then Crosley and Rodriguez, all of them returning from the Halivanu ship with insane stories. The first cracks began to appear in Wharton's self-confidence. Maybe there *was* something in those spacehounds' tales of the Halivanu.

No. Beyond belief.

But how else to explain what had happened to his men? Schizophrenia wasn't contagious, was it? It was hard to swallow the fact that three men had gone out to the aliens and three men had returned . . . *changed*. That was the only word for it. And changed retroactively. Crosley even denied the validity of the tape he had made.

By morning, Wharton knew what his only choice was. He was no longer concerned primarily with protecting Terra's sovereignty. That was important, but not as important as finding out just what kind of hocus-pocus the Halivanu had pulled on his men. And the only way to find out was to go to the aliens himself.

But, of course, certain necessary precautions ought to be taken—just in case.

When morning came he sent for Captain Lowell, one of the senior officers—*the* senior officer, with both Breckenridge and Crosley on the unreliable list. "Lowell, I'm going to make a trip to the Halivanu ship myself. You're in charge of the base till I get back. And—listen carefully—I'm going to give the Halivanu four hours to get off this planet. At the end of four hours' time I want you to blast them with the heavy-cycle guns, even if I order you not to do it. Got that? Go against my direct order, if you have to."

Lowell looked utterly befuddled. "Sir, I don't understand—"

"Don't try to understand. Just listen. I've made a tape of this conver-

sation. Keep it safe and play it for me when I get back."

Leaving behind a sorely confused Lowell, Wharton made his way out to the jetsled. Smithson, who had piloted Breckenridge, was again at the controls.

They traveled in silence, the jets boosting the sled quickly and smoothly over the flat plains. The sun rose higher as they traveled. Wharton found himself yearning for the comfort of Deepsleep. But that would have to wait a few more hours, he thought. The matter would be settled, one way or another, in a few hours. If only Lowell would have the guts to disobey him, in case he came back *changed*. Wharton smiled. He was confident he'd return in full command of his senses.

It was midmorning when the sled reached the plateau where the Halivanu had established camp. Wharton saw tents surrounding the sleek alien-looking spaceship, and half a dozen Halivanu were busily setting up instrumentation. They were tall, thin beings with coarse-grained, glossy gray-green skin. As the sled pulled up, one of them detached himself from the group and came toward Wharton.

"You Earthmen must enjoy paying us visits," the alien said in the Fawdese dialect. "By my count, you're the third."

"And the last," Wharton said. Despite himself, he felt an uneasy chill. The Halivanu had a strange, sickly-sweet odor and was nearly seven feet tall.

"What is your message?" the Halivanu asked, and in the same instant Wharton felt something like a feather brushing the back of his skull.

"I . . . *what are you doing?*" He put his hand to the back of his head —but the feather still tickled him—

And then his panic died away.

"Well?" the alien demanded.

Wharton smiled. "I'm the Terran commander. I've come to . . . to tell you that it's all right . . . that you can stay here until you're through."

"Thank you," said the Halivanu gravely. He smiled, revealing black gums, and Wharton returned the smile. "Is that all?"

"Yes. Yes, that's all," Wharton said. He looked at Smithson. "We didn't have anything else to say, did we, Smithson?"

Smithson shrugged. "I don't think so, sir."

"Good. We might as well go back, then."

Lowell greeted him as the jetsled rumbled into the center of the compound. "Did all go well, sir?"

"Fine," Wharton said.

"The Halivanu are leaving, then?"

"Leaving?" Wharton frowned. "Why should they be leaving? They've only begun their work."

"But . . . Colonel—"

"Yes, what is it?" Wharton snapped testily.

"You left an order—you said that at the end of four hours we should open fire on the Halivanu if they were still here."

Wharton frowned and started to walk on. "Must have been a mistake, Lowell. Order countermanded."

Lowell ducked around and put himself in front of the colonel. "I'm sorry, sir. You told me to proceed on schedule even against your direct order."

"Nonsense!"

"There's a tape recording in your office—"

"I don't care. The Halivanu have permission to stay here. Let's have no talk of going against my direct orders, shall we?"

Mottled blotches appeared on Lowell's jowly face. "Colonel, I know this sounds strange, but you yourself insisted—"

"And I myself countermand the order! Do I have to make it any clearer, captain? Please get out of my way. I say 'please' because you're an officer, but—"

Lowell stood his ground. Sweat rolled down his forehead. "The tape—"

"Will you give ground, Lowell?"

"No, sir. You definitely specified that I should not listen to any subsequent order countermanding your original one. And therefore—"

"Any commanding officer who gives a nonretractable order has to be out of his head," Wharton snapped. He signaled to two of the men nearby. "Place Captain Lowell in restrictive custody. I may be easy-going, but I won't tolerate insubordination."

Lowell, still protesting, was borne away. Wharton went on into his office. A tape was in the recorder. With a thoughtful frown he nudged the *playback* knob and listened.

*". . . I'm going to give the Halivanu four hours to get off this planet. At the end of four hours' time I want you to blast them with the heavy-cycle guns, even if I order you not to do it. Got that? Go against my direct order . . ."*

Wharton's shaggy eyebrows lifted questioningly. Beyond a doubt it was his own voice. But why should he have said such a thing? The Halivanu had every right to be here. Why, right here on his desk was the authorization from Terra, allowing them to stop here for a while and make solar observations. The paper was right here—he fumbled through a pile of documents without coming across it. He shrugged. It had probably been misfiled. But he knew it was here, somewhere. He had seen it with his own eyes, after all.

What about the tape, then? Colonel Wharton shook his head and decided he must be getting old, to have ever given Lowell weird orders like that. Somewhere deep in his mind a silent voice was lifted in inner protest, but the complaint, wordless, never reached conscious levels. Yawning wearily, Wharton flipped the *erase* knob on the tape recorder, waited until the message was completely obliterated, and ambled over to the infirmary for his ninety minutes of Deepsleep.

THE END

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BY P. SCHUYLER MILLER

## THE MAD SCIENTISTS

LAST June 3rd, the newspapers carried the obituary of an English writer whom almost nobody knew by his own name, Arthur Sarsfield Ward. As Sax Rohmer, however, he almost created the "mad scientist" school of thrillers which other and often better writers happily took up and played for all it was worth in the years between the two World Wars. The first "Dr. Fu Manchu" story appeared in 1913; the last will be out this fall. It is ironic that Sax Rohmer should die just as

the type of story that had become identified with him is beginning a new cycle of success.

Once upon a time, when the world was very young, all a hero needed was some muscles and a club. With it he could wallop another brawny, leering male or destroy a saber-toothed tiger, and drag a fair damsel back to his cave by the back hair. Then he and the tribal yarn-spinners would boast about his exploits for the rest of their days, improving a little here and glossing over an embarrassing lapse there to make the story go more smoothly and keep the audience entertained.

Eventually, however, muscle-men, savage beasts, and the forces of nature grew a little tame, and the teen-agers began drifting away from the fire at story time and leaning against a rock down by the pool. Physical prowess alone didn't carry enough suspense: you knew the guy was a hero, because the story was about him, and any hero could lick all adversaries between yawns. A new type of villain—a real menace—was needed, and so the wicked magician was born.

When you're up against magic, anything can happen. Its very essence is that it is irrational: you can't outsmart it. The rat who uses it against you is a dirty fighter with concealed powers, and any hero who wins out against odds like those is doing something *really* big! The paleolithic beatniks began straggling back to the fireside.

Down through the millennia, the fight against evil sorcery was just about the ultimate in heroics, in legend and pure fiction. You didn't have to motivate your villain—everyone believed in Evil as a force that inevitably clashed with Good, represented by our hero. You could spin out the suspense unbearably, by giving the wicked magician unheard of powers that slapped back the hero again and again, until at last his staying powers, or wits, or love, or luck, or a good magician won out.

Down almost to our own time, enough people had this belief in innate evil for the wicked magician theme to retain some force. As I recall the early "Fu Manchu" stories, the evil doctor operated out of sheer cussedness, and this was certainly the thesis that kept *Weird Tales* going so long, and that was implicit in Lovecraft's school of horror-fantasy.

But in our rational, irreligious age, not very many people believe in evil —not even in evil actions by villainous individuals. Today it's "antisocial behavior," and the villain is a complex and fascinating character whom we're likely to admire more than the hero, who is just like everybody else we know.

Sax Rohmer and the other writers of his school, being intelligent, professional men, saw what was happening and changed their approach to match. Instead of the evil magician of yore, we had the mad scientist. Scientist, because science had become the magic of the Twentieth Century; mad, because there had to be some plausible reason for the guy's trying to slaughter everyone in sight, saw

beautiful girls in two, and blow up the world. Many of the rare, little known "borderline" books that SF collectors hunt for are the "mad scientist" thrillers of this era, adventure stories rather than mysteries, and certainly no part of the movement that Wells and a few others were starting.

Then science fiction burst out as a school of writing with vigor and rules and a following all its own, and the mad scientist really came into his own. The once basically simple action theme was complicated and developed in several ways that are still with us, and that have given rise to stereotypes of their own. And now, forty-six years after Fu Manchu perpetrated his first deviltry, other writers of superior thrillers are taking this world menace back from us.

Simplest of the mad scientist variants is the one transplanted bodily from the thrillers of Rohmer, Oppenheim, Fletcher, Wallace and many others, in which the hero is a layman and the villain a scientist. Within the science-fiction genre, only the trappings and trimmings distinguish these yarns from mad scientist tales by non-SF writers: more trouble is taken with the gobbledegook.

If the hero is himself a scientist, the villain almost has to be another scientist in order to rate as a fair adversary—and if he's going to act villainously, he is probably mad. I suppose Captain Nemo, in Verne's "20,000 Leagues Under the Seas," was one of the first of these. A little later, Dr. Edward E. Smith gave the type a new lease on life with his "Skylark of Space" series, in which Dr. Blackie Duquesne was a worthy scientific villain. Rationalization drew in a good deal of conscious or unconscious racism as the form developed: if the villainous scientist is of our own race and culture, obviously he has to be insane to act as he does—taking the lust for power or "master of the world" motive as paranoia. If he is of another race, like Fu Manchu, mad or evil motives can be attributed to his whole race. Science fiction neatly switched this to the "aliens"—Martians, Centaurians, mutants, or BEMs from anywhere at all.

There is an excellent new example of this type of mad-scientist thriller in John Blackburn's "A Sour Apple Tree"—M. S. Mill Co., New York; 189 pp.; $3.50. It's the best of several I had in mind when I said that the school of thriller Rohmer practically invented is coming back, because this book and others like it was not written as science fiction, though it fits our category well.

This is the story of a series of inexplicable murders by insane killers who promptly kill themselves. They seem linked only because they always seem to block the search for an English traitor, John Glyde, who vanished from Germany after the war, but who may still be alive. Gradually it appears that someone may be causing the deaths, perhaps by some kind of reinforced telepathy; then there is a suggestion that Glyde himself may have returned to England with some machine to amplify and direct his

telepathic powers, so that he can control a killer.

The story is beautifully developed both in suspense and unfolding logic, as was the same author's "A Scent of New-Mown Hay." It would be a shame to give away the climax by explaining how he has woven together at least two variants of the mad scientist theme in a story that is as good science fiction, though not intended to be such, as much in the SF magazines.

There are two other variations on the mad-scientist theme, however, that have a more serious aspect to them, in that they lend support to the anti-scientific, anti-intellectual attitude that many people seem to hold. They are both themes that have been developed into stereotypes within science fiction, as well as outside.

One is the "sorcerer's apprentice" theme, which shows us scientists as a lot of Pandoras, well-meaning, fumbling fools who monkey with the mechanism of the Universe with no regard for the consequences. You know the type well, I am sure. Recently we've had it in Charles Eric Maine's "The Tide Went Out," in which H-bomb tests blew a hole in the bottom of the Pacific, let the plug out of the oceans, and destroyed the world. Outside of SF proper, we have it most delightfully and satirically employed in "The Fig Tree," by Aubrey Menen, an English-born writer whose Indian father and Irish mother seem to have bequeathed him an exceptional skill with words.

This novel — Charles Scribner's Sons, New York; 192 pp.; $3.50—is the story of a dedicated scientist, sent to Italy to help the government increase the yield of its crops. He finds a substance which, injected into a fig tree, greatly improves its health and produces figs the size of grapefruit—which turn out to be powerful aphrodisiacs. It would have been easy for a salacious writer to turn this theme into a leering, cavorting orgy of rutting peasants and decadent nobility, but Mr. Menen has a surer and lighter hand on the scalpel. His scientist, Harry Wesley, and a gourmet neighbor, Joe Bellman, are the ones who eat the figs and who find their hitherto quiet lives suddenly and violently changed by urges they neither understand nor like—much. The comedy of their attempts to sublimate the urge in classics studies and hiking is deftly mixed with satiric insight into the foibles of science, classical scholars, the fringes of the Vatican, government bureaucracy, and mankind in general. It is more suave and civilized than Thorne Smith, or so it seems to me, but its theme is the blundering scientist who cares nothing for the consequences of his actions.

There is the variant which shows us the ruthless scientist—not one who blunders into trouble, but one who knows very well where he is going and doesn't give a damn for the consequences to other people. It is disturbing to see this type played up in a science-fiction novel for teen-agers, Hugh Walters' "Menace from the Moon"—Criterion Books, New York;

191 pp.; $3.50—a rather mediocre sequel to "Blast-Off at 0300."

In the earlier book the rather runtish teen-age hero, Chris Godfrey, was the only person in the world who could be sent up in a rocket to get photos of some mysterious domes on the Moon. In this book, the creatures on the Moon begin to shower the Earth with neutrons, and Chris has to go up again to guide a retaliatory shower of missiles with atomic warheads to the target near Pico. This would ordinarily be enough, but for good measure the author offers a ruthless-scientist villain, head of the whole project, who conceals the fact that Chris is not coming back. The reasons are not very plausible, though they are tinkered up so that the man is not evil or mad—just ruthless in believing that the end justifies his using any means.

These two attitudes—that scientists are feckless fumblers with the "secrets" of Nature, knowing and caring little about the consequences of what they turn up, and that scientists are ruthless in their investigations, knowing but not caring about what they may do to others—are deeply involved in the world-wide controversy over nuclear bomb testing. There are certainly many people, including many scientists, who feel that the advocates of further testing are blundering into a situation where radioactive fall-out will destroy us somatically and genetically. There are others who feel that "scientists" don't care about what happens to anyone else.

I am afraid that they are attitudes which science fiction—not just "outside" thrillers or novels—has fostered pretty actively for years. To us these may be formal stereotypes; to many they may reinforce a concept of what scientists "really" are like.

Back in the June issue, John Campbell began his editorial, "Science is a Menace," with the statement: "The fundamental concept in Science is that there are Truths which, willy-nilly, like-it-or-not, are true and must be accepted." Most people, including our intellectual leaders, do not understand this *or accept it*: To Society, "truth is what we say it is"—the edict of the old men, or of the gods, or law, or the neighbors.

The man who does not accept this definition of truth is obviously mad. Perhaps, really, the stereotypes of science fiction and the thrillers reflect a social reality: from the point of view of Society, maybe all scientists are mad.

---

VIRGIN PLANET, by Poul Anderson. Avalon Books, N. Y. 1959. 224 pp. $2.75

Here, from science fiction's second-best adventure writer—Andre Norton still gets my first-place vote—is a joyous frolic on a world of women with only one man.

It seems that a shipful of women, bound for a colonial planet, was wrecked on a very peculiarly isolated world, actually one satellite of a Jupiter-type planet of a double star. They had no men, but they did have

biologists who were able to reproduce the race and its various family strains by parthenogenesis. Through three hundred years, Atlantis developed a strange man-less social structure—all members of a family physically identical, and all carrying on the special skills determined by the frozen aptitudes of their first member.

Into this world blunders a healthy, hairy, wealthy young man who is greeted as a Monster, since he fails to meet the specifications of Man as passed down in legend. He has the immediate and obvious reaction of any red-blooded Galactic male set down amidst such bounty, but the stiffness of the social order makes it very different for him to profit from his opportunities. Presently, after a bloody snatch of war between his captors and their jealous neighbor-towns, Davis Bertram is in flight with two red-headedly identical warrior-maids and a brunette hereditary courtesan.

I can't think of a story since de Camp's "Rogue Queen" in which sex has been so essential to the plot, yet so smoothly handled to keep a broad grin from degenerating into a snicker or a leer. Hollywood has tried its hand at the theme rather often, most recently in a ludicrous job with Zsa-Zsa Gabor whose only attractions were anatomical, but if any producer-director team could be persuaded to play this one straight, they'd have a grand show on their hands.

IMMORTALITY DELIVERED, by Robert Sheckley. Avalon Books, N. Y. 1958. 221 pp. $2.75

This is one of those books which is going to carry with it a smog of rumor and counter-rumor. I should have had it last November, but it was either never mailed or wound up in someone else's hands; queries brought no reply. Meanwhile, the author had written to complain that the publisher had largely rewritten the book, lopping out some ten thousand to fifteen thousand words, dropping important scenes, and tacking on a new ending which Mr. Sheckley considers completely false to everything he intended. This, he reports, was done without his consent or knowledge; he knew nothing about it until he got copies of the finished book.

The publisher — even before Sheckley's letter came—had written to say that changes between the book and the magazine version, "Time Killers," were entirely editorial. The author adds that the complete version will eventually be published as a Bantam paperback, and I intend to leave comparison until then.

"Immortality Delivered" — which I finally got from Pick-a-Book, leaving me uncertain whether the book has been withdrawn or not— is an off-trail attempt to draw psychic survival or life-after-death into the science-fiction orbit without becoming entangled in mystical or religious concerns. In this version, at least, the action seems to override the theme:

I'll be curious to compare the Bantam edition, since I haven't the magazine version handy.

Thomas Blaine dies in an automobile crash on the New Jersey Turnpike and wakes up in someone else's body, in the year 2110. His mind has been drawn through time, at the moment of death, by the Rex Corporation, one of a number of companies dealing in physical and/or mental immortality. For a price, a man of the Twenty-second Century can have his elderly mind transferred into a nice, young, healthy body with lots of life left in it—even, if he has a taste for novelty, into a woman's body. The occupant of the host body has sold it in return for a guarantee that his or her mind will also be immortal, in some half-defined Hereafter which is neither Heaven nor Hell, nor exactly Purgatory.

The society that has evolved around this scientific feat is as unpleasant as anything since Fritz Leiber's "Coming Attraction." Blaine, after Rex decides not to use him as an advertising gimmick; is turned loose to make his own way, and gets into a suitable number of predicaments through his lack of understanding of what goes on around him. He is haunted by a malicious poltergeist, all too easily and obviously identified and exorcised, and dogged by a nameless zombie—the wrong mind in a half-dead body. He earns his keep, for a time, as a member of a hunting pack hired to run down and kill their employer—if they can—in a part of the Adirondacks that I know well. He is tricked into becoming the quarry himself, and escapes through a chain of bodies.

As you can see, the plot has everything in it that even a van Vogt could inject. Whether the omissions would make it more convincing, I don't know, but there's just too much in the present form for any one part of it to come to life.

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STARMAN'S QUEST, by Robert Silverberg. Gnome Press, Hicksville, N. Y. 1959. 185 pp. $3.00

This is another of Gnome's rare but usually good juveniles, whose best examples have been the yarns by Andrew North—otherwise Andre Norton, and really the un-swashbuckling Alice Mary Norton. It's a modern Alger-type story about the rise to fortune of a seventeen-year-old spacer, Alan Donnell, but right there the Alger flavor stops and professionally handled science-fiction themes move in.

The basic theme is the Fitzgerald time-lag, whereby starmen traveling at near the speed of light age only months, while their friends and relations back on Earth live through years. The immediate result is a divided society, with the small Enclave of Spacers becoming more and more isolated and ingrown, and the hostility of aging, changing Earth growing ever greater.

Into this pattern we toss twins,

Alan and Steve Donnell, sons of the captain of the *Valhalla*. Alan, on the ship, is seventeen; Steve, who jumped ship on their last visit to Earth, is nine years older. So, back on Earth again, Alan sets out to find his brother and is promptly entangled in the complex social organization of a New York that is centuries older than the Spacer society. Presently we have the unlikely situation—in an old-time Alger book, at least—of a teen-ager setting out to become a successful professional gambler.

To detail the plot any further would spoil the well-handled story. A secondary element is Alan's dogged determination to find the lost Cavour Hyperdrive which will end the schism between Earth and Space by making travel practically instantaneous. One of the best touches is Alan's pet "Rat" from Bellatrix—except that it raises the pretty ethical question of why a member of an intelligent race should be reduced to pet status. Of course, the rats of Bellatrix may just think they have trained Men to keep them in unearned plenty . . .

Some economics: if you order this or any other Gnome Press book through your bookstore, you pay the full price I have listed. If you buy directly from the publisher through his "Pick-a-Book" plan, at Box 161, Hicksville, New York, you can get the price down as low as $1.20. Pick-a-Book now includes the Avalon books, too.

3 FROM OUT THERE, edited by Leo Margulies. Crest Books No. S-282. 1959. 192 pp. 35¢

The three stories of the title are Isaac Asimov's "Mother Earth," first printed here in Astounding in 1949, Damon Knight's "Double Meaning" from the January 1953 *Startling*, and Edmond Hamilton's "Son of Two Worlds" from the August 1941 *Thrilling Wonder*—both of the two latter magazines having then been under the editor's wing.

All three stories have a basic similarity, in that they contrast the culture of a colonial planet with that of a mature to decadent Earth, but that is about as far as the similarity can be forced. The stories by Asimov and Knight are serious fictional studies of the interrelations of colonial and home governments, while Edmond Hamilton's is a mild entertainment on what Robert Heinlein once called the "little tailor" theme, in which the country boy is outsmarted by city slickers until he uses country skills on them.

"Mother Earth," though it has an adequately tangled plot, is the more direct of the two in arriving at its message. The mysterious Pacific Project with which Mother Earth plans to combat the arrogant racism of the Outer Worlds can't be explained without giving away the kicker in the plot, which is also the point of the story. "Double Meaning," on the other hand, is a far more complex structure—as might be expected from an

author who holds himself to his own high standards. The search for a disguised extraterrestrial monster, one of a group who have hidden planet-smashing bombs on Earth as a means of preventing human aggression against nonhumans, is only the framework for a fasinating interplay between Thorne Spangler, chief of the Security organization that is hunting for the Rithian, and an outworld nobody, Jorj Pembun, called in because his people know the Rithians well. Involved, too, are the complexities of Spangler's own unstable personality.

"Son of Two Worlds," as I've said, is simple and quite ordinary. Stephen Drew, brought up on Mars among Martians, goes to Earth to save the family mine and its Martian laborers from being taken over by a tycoon customer. He becomes entangled in Earthly double-talk and financial skulduggery, and has to resort to more direct Martian methods to get back the papers. I dunno why Leo Margulies used it here; Edmond Hamilton has written a lot better stories, though maybe not for *Thrilling Wonder.*

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THE SUN SMASHER, by Edmond Hamilton.

STARHAVEN, by Ivar Jorgenson. Ace Books No. D-351. 1959. 110+ 146 pp. 35¢

The longer section of this Ace Double is a reprint of last year's Avalon hardback edition: an intrigue-adventure yarn about the world run by and for outlaws. Edmond Hamilton's share is in the same category, on a galactic scale.

Neil Banning, book salesman, goes "home" to the little Nebraska town of his vividly and fondly remembered boyhood, only to find that the town denies he ever lived there. He is quickly snatched away into space by a crew of hard characters who insist he is really Kyle Valkar, heir to an interstellar empire, whose memories have been rearranged by order of a rival empress. Somewhere in his lost memory is the secret of the Hammer, a weapon of the Valkares which can insure their victory over Tharanya and her second Empire. Little by little he is persuaded that he is Kyle . . . plots the snatching of Tharanya and the scientist, Jommor . . . regains his memory, finds the Hammer, and uses it, with an unexpected result.

Edmond Hamilton can exhibit a fan letter of mine in which I insisted his space-sweeping yarns in the old *Weird Tales* were the best things being written. I don't think anyone else ever achieved quite the same sense of the immensity of the universe and the fellowship of nonhuman races. That is something I miss here in a rather routine adventure yarn. Its best feature is the spider race, reminiscent of Merritt's "Face in the Abyss" but "human" in its own right.

SCAVENGERS IN SPACE, by Alan E. Nourse. David McKay Co., New York. 1959. 180 pp. $2.75.

Alan Nourse has been too busy being an M.D. in the state of Washington to contribute much science fiction lately. Too bad. In this teen-age space-adventure he sets up an astronomical puzzle whose solution can be guessed if you know enough science—and not future science, either.

In the Twenty-second Century, men are mining the asteroids for metals and Jupiter Equilateral, a monster corporation, is trying to squeeze or bludgeon out the independent miners, and to keep United Nations control out of space, pending the day when it can get to the stars. Roger Hunter, father of teen-aged Tom and Greg, is murdered by Equilateral strongarm men, just after he has made a fabulous strike somewhere in the asteroid belt. His killers can't find it, and the boys set out with their dad's old partner to see what they can see. Naturally, there is more piracy, and a glorious episode in which they cut up the opposition's space station like so much chopped lettuce, before astronomy brings the answer.

This one is in the category with Isaac Asimov's "Lucky Starr" series—as "Paul French"—and the Pohl-Williamson undersea yarns. No Heinlein and no Norton, but those belong on any adult shelf.

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THE VANISHING ISLAND, by Charles C. O'Connell. Devin-Adair Company, New York. 1959. 211 pp. $3.50.

I trust you've seen the series of fine poetic ads by the Irish distillers, whose tenor is that if you want to drink Irish, please do, and if you like coffee, that's fine with them, but why mix them? I feel the same way about this book, whose author—to do him some justice—protests bitterly in an afterword that it is *not* science fiction.

Technically he's wrong, because he means his beautiful girl from the stars to be taken seriously and not as one of Ireland's fairy folk. Practically he's right, because what is good about the book is its Irish flavor, in the early parts, before anyone tries to explain what happened to snatch nine people off the island of Innishios, in the midst of one of the worst storms the west of Ireland had ever seen. This section, if not unusual, is still tasty; when the lady in the flying saucer mixes in, it's pouring whipped cream on an otherwise fine potion. But in the lists the dealers will be calling it SF, and so it is.

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THE MOON, by George Gamow. Abelard-Schuman, New York. 1959. 127 pp. $2.75.

This is a new, revised edition of a book for young people that first came out in 1953. I include it here, because it's an example of Gamow at his best. This top theoretical physicist, now at the University of Colorado, has a genius for making the intricate relationships of science almost ludicrously plain by his choice of analogies and examples. He has a

gift for drawing on seemingly insignificant bits of information, and fitting them into the total pattern.

This is a very short book—just a smattering of our knowledge of the Moon, from ancient legends to a future Moon-base. There is more information elsewhere for not much more money. But Gamow's approach is a delight. Get it out of the children's room in the library, and have a look, just for those few novel twists of viewpoint.

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OSSIAN'S RIDE, by Fred Hoyle. Harper & Brothers, New York. 1959. 207 pp. $3.00.

This second science-fiction novel by the rebellious English astronomer, one of the founders of the "continuous creation" theory of the Universe and author of "The Black Cloud," is head-and-shoulders over the first book as a story and a piece of writing. Its form is that of a spy story—the kind John Buchan did superlatively—and it could stand as such without its SF elements. What these all are I can't explain without giving away the final secret of the plot, though you may guess that well in advance.

By 1970, it seems, a mysterious industrial and technological force has dug itself into the southwest corner of Ireland, and thrown up a kind of "Shamrock Curtain" around itself, from which only rumors and faked "secrets" emerge. Whatever Industrial Corporation Eire may be, it is not only revolutionizing Irish economy but setting a technological pace that the rest of the world can't follow. One of the least of the Irish developments is a working hydrogen-fusion power plant; any early coup was the extraction of a contraceptive from good Irish turf.

At any rate, the outside world is curious, jealous and scared, and Thomas Sherwood, a young English physicist, is drafted by British Intelligence to get into the ICE territory and find out what is happening. To do this, he has not only to get past the ICE guards but to cope with the Irish government and with representatives of assorted busy and very ruthless organizations that have or want a finger in the pie.

There's a fine, drawn-out chase across the Irish countryside, peril aplenty, and final revelations that not only make sense but are integral to the working of the plot. Now Dr. Hoyle has his stride, I hope we'll have more from him.

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# THE RE-PRINTS

THE HUNGER AND OTHER STORIES, by Charles Beaumont. Bantam Books No. A-1917. 183 pp. 35¢

A collection of ghoulish entertainments, several of which are borderline SF-fantasy with a macabre touch of John Collier. Putnam published the hard-back in 1958.

IMAGINATION UNLIMITED, edited by Everett F. Bleiler & T. E.

Dikty. Berkley Books No. G-233. 172 pp. 35¢

Seven of the thirteen stories from the 1952 Farrar, Straus & Cudahy anthology. All but two originated here in Astounding.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOON, edited by August Derleth. Berkley Books No. G-249. 172 pp. 35¢

This time you get ten of the twenty stories in the original Farrar, Straus Cudahy hard-bound edition, and I'd say the stories—including one of mine—are more dated than in the Bleiler-Dikty lot. Derleth, you'll recall, is conservative and literary in his SF tastes, Lovecraftish in his fantasy.

THE LOST WORLD, by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Pyramid Books No. PR-15. 192 pp. 35¢

Need I tell you more than the title of this pioneering adventure yarn that launched today's onslaught of Hollywood monsters?

THE BLACK CLOUD, by Fred Hoyle. Signet Books No. S-1673. 191 pp. 35¢

The first novel by England's controversial young cosmologist: a sentient cloud threatens to end all life on Earth. The author's new "Ossian's Ride" is a better story.

THE ABC OF RELATIVITY, by Bertrand Russell. Mentor Books No. MD-258. 144 pp. 50¢

First written in 1925 by the mathematician-philosopher, this is still one of the best popular accounts of what relativity is all about. The book was updated in 1958 by Felix Pirani, with the author's approval.

POINT ULTIMATE, by Jerry Sohl. Bantam Books No. A-1952. 151 pp. 35¢

The original edition was out in 1955. The author has done better and worse than this yarn about the usual underground in revolt against Communist conquerors, in 1999.

ODD JOHN, by Olaf Stapledon. (Beacon Books No. 236)

THE DEVIATES, by Raymond F. Jones. (Beacon Books No. 242)

These two titles introduce the new format of "Galaxy Science Fiction Novels." Beacon, an old hand at PB sexsationalism, is jazzling the covers up, but Horace Gold stands over the text with a drawn blaster. You'll see Stapledon's John ravening at a babe on one cover, and one of Jones' "Secret People" ripping the blouse off a blonde on the other, but "Odd John" is still a classic and "Secret People" is a good mutant yarn.

THE MOUSE THAT ROARED, by Leonard Wibberley. Bantam Books No. A-1982. 152 pp. 35¢

A purely delightful comedy about the tiny Duchy of Grand Fenwick whose expeditionary force of twenty longbowmen invade New York City and capture the Bomb of Bombs.

THE END

(*Continued from page 9*)
standard from serf to citizen of an industrial power.

Don't expect to convince a Russian, who has himself lived through that period, that Communism isn't a great and heavenly thing. In the lifetimes of *men now living,* they have gone from serfdom to industrialism.

Look at the mistakes we made on the way! We fumbled and bumbled and spent one hundred fifty years getting here. Is a one-hundred-fifty-year process going to compete, in attractiveness, with a process that worked in forty years—with a process that can offer *men now living* hopes of achieving industrial-culture level?

What does Sam, the American culture-machine salesman, have to sell? Hope for the fourth generation . . . if all goes well.

That's an unfair presentation; agreed. But it's a *truthful* presentation, and as such, makes a mighty fine argument for Ivan to present. Ivan's got facts to present.

Do we have a blue-print *method* for a feudal-culture people to go from where they are, to where we are?

We do not.

The Russians have. It's called Communism, and, like it or not, willy-nilly, we are painfully forced to admit that *it does work.* It worked in Russia. It's beginning to work in China.

At this point, it's necessary to consider what I might call the "Gunga Din's Drink syndrome." If you recall the Kipling poem, the British soldier was wounded, miserable, and sick—and most horrendously thirsty. And Gunga Din brought him a drink. "It was crawlin' and it stunk, but of all the drinks I've drunk, I'm gratefullest for that one from Gunga Din!"

From the viewpoint of the Russian ex-serf, the Marx-Lenin-Stalin method has the singular virtue of being what he needed most desperately, when he most desperately needed it —i.e., in his own lifetime. You may, with perfect propriety, point out that it was crawlin' and it stunk; he remains, with perfectly sound rationality, *most* grateful for that drink from Marx-Lenin-Stalin.

You may well feel that the American Democracy method is far superior—but your great-grandfather would have been a fool if he hadn't moved out of Indian-infested wilderness into Russia, A.D. 1960, if he had a chance. It may be wonderful for *you* . . . but it wasn't such a hot system from the viewpoint of a pioneer woman in labor, and taking potshots at raiding Indians between pains.

The worst of our politico-social problem is that we don't know which factors of our bumbling, fumbling past were necessary, and which were not. A lot of the things we *think* were egregious mistakes may, in actual fact, have been no more mistakes than a child's first teeth. They all have to be discarded, don't they?

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That proves they were a mistake in the first place, doesn't it?

The Russians have a plan of development that *does* work and work in one lifetime. We have neither a plan, nor one that works in a lifetime. Sam, unfortunately, is trying to sell a product that he doesn't actually have!

Look; Eusapia Palladino demonstrated levitation. Edgar Cayce repeatedly demonstrated clairvoyance. Now anyone can see that levitation is at least as desirable as modern elevators or airplanes, and certainly clairvoyance is more to be desired than TV sets. Why haven't people accepted Cayce's demonstrated clairvoyance for themselves?

Because, like poor old Sam trying to sell American culture, we'll agree willingly enough that it'd be wonderful to have . . . but Cayce neglected to explain *how* to get there. Palladino neglected to clarify the *method of achieving* levitation.

And Sam, the cultural salesman, is in precisely the same spot. Sure, having what Americans have is something everybody wants—but Sam can't, actually, tell how to achieve it a bit better than Cayce and Palladino could.

Ivan doesn't have to have the best cultural-machine on the market to win the sale; he can tell his customer precisely how to get it. Sam's may be better—but he can't explain how to get it.

Conclusion: Ivan will, with absolutely predictable certainty, win the politico-social war. Ivan won't need

to use military measures to win the world. We may have something more desirable—but then, clairvoyance is much more desirable than TV. But TV sets sell a lot better.

The physical scientists of the West must maintain their work; we must see to it that we remain a first-line military power.

But we're losing the politico-social front for good, sound reason. The social scientists have not done one-tenth as good a job as the Marx-Lenin-Stalin team did. They have not worked out the engineering—the social-engineering — techniques that make it possible for a people to go from feudalism to industrialism in a single lifetime; the professional social scientists haven't worked out *any* short method. Marx may have been a crackpot, Lenin a fanatic, and Stalin a dictator; the drink they served was crawlin' an' it stunk—but it remains the best (because the only!) drink available. They did have a specific, blueprinted, communicable-teachable method that worked.

How did we get here?

Largely by accident, truthfully. We didn't know where we were going until after we arrived. Sure, the Russians had the immense advantage of knowing where to go; that's part of the reason they could do it in forty instead of one hundred fifty years.

But we, today, know so pitifully little about social dynamics that no man alive can say for certain that


# Maybe You Too Can WRITE

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Perhaps you are one of those people who have a flair for writing. So, why don't you try to make money writing this way?

Your big problem may be that your work lacks the "secret" ingredients used by professional writers. What is the "secret"? Frankly, there's nothing secret about those ingredients. Most any professional *fiction* writer who *is* also a *good teacher* and is *willing* to figure them all out and *explain* them *to you* could do so—*maybe!*

Now, where can you learn these so-called secrets? Well, there are many schools. I happen to be President of one of the oldest, and while I am naturally prejudiced, I honestly believe we have the best course and the most helpful instructors in the business. Our students and graduates say the same thing. True, not everyone succeeds, but many sell when only halfway through the course, and many more become full-time professional selling writers.

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slavery wasn't an absolutely necessary part of the method! Having strong emotional feelings on the subject proves absolutely nothing; for all we *know,* a period of slavery may be like baby teeth—necessary for a time, but necessarily discarded later. I cite this not as a statement of fact, but as an instance of utter, abysmal ignorance of social *science.* Social science is, to too great an extent, social emotionalism, to the immense detriment of Mankind.

Today we jibe at Russia for having so little consumer goods, while everything goes to a huge military budget. Space-satellites they have, but there's a shortage of shoes and good clothing.

Are you sure that isn't an absolutely necessary part of the process? You are? Then why did we do exactly the same thing? Why was it that, in the period 1860-1870, the United States had the highest, most dangerous military technology on Earth . . . while the people went barefoot a good part of the year for lack of shoes, and the clothing was rough, tough, and barbarous? Think that wasn't the case? Well, don't read *our* books of *today;* read what Europe, then, had to say of us. The comical American barbarians, the laughable backwoodsmen with their impossibly barbarous clothing!

Some of the laughter quieted down with a gulp, however, when the battle of the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac* "sank the navies of the world."

And . . . know who invented mass production — assembly-line production? No, not Henry Ford—Eli Whitney. He invented the system for producing rifles for the United States Army. Military technology, not peacetime use.

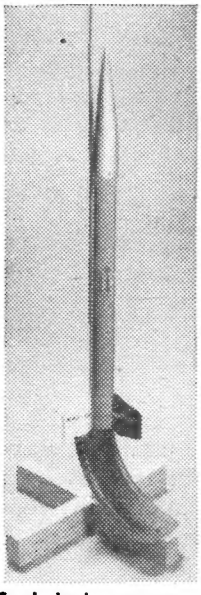
And Great Britain, after the Civil War, was being decidedly stuffy about paying off the claims arising from the damages done by the Confederate ship *Alabama,* which the British had built and equipped. Until, that is, the United States Navy demonstrated its new cruiser, designed by the designer of the *Monitor*—a screw-propelled, iron-armored ship carrying turret-mounted guns, and sailing on the high seas some forty per cent faster than any other ship afloat.

It was manned, of course, by those barefoot barbarians from America's backwoods.

Are you *sure* that it's necessarily wrong to let the people go ill-clothed and unshod while a great military technology is developed? Do you *know* the laws of socio-economic dynamics well enough to be able to be certain Russia isn't doing precisely the appropriate and necessary thing?

No, friend, you don't. Not while our social scientists can't tell us how we got where we are, what moves we made were necessary, and which were mistaken blunderings.

A witch doctor is, usually, a man with a lot of rituals and formulas—strictly rule of thumb stuff. Don't hold that they are meaningless and pointless, though; we got such medi-



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cines as quinine, curare, digitalis, and a host of others from that source.

The Russian Marx-Lenin-Stalin technique is witch-doctor stuff. It works; that's the hard essential. It's powerful medicine; it gives the patient convulsions, half kills him, and sickens him most violently. But it does change him from a serf to a citizen.

The American method isn't even on the witch-doctor level; we don't have a rule of thumb that works. We're just lucky enough to have bumbled our way through the crisis of the disease somehow. Washington and Jefferson, the great fighters for freedom, were slave-owners; we strongly reject such things today, and hold it has no place. The so-called "robber barons" of the late nineteenth century are despised and rejected today—but they built the great transportation networks that made a nation possible. They built the great steel mills.

Nearly all the methods that America actually used in achieving what we are today, we demean and despise.

This being the case . . . what would Americans say of a country that did, in actual fact, start doing exactly what we did in an effort to achieve what we have achieved?

Oh, well, you can't say we aren't broad-minded. In the high name of Democracy we support a dictator here, an absolute monarch there, a

feudal aristocracy elsewhere. Democracy is a strange thing, it seems.

Strange indeed—when we don't know what it is, nor how to achieve it.

But it makes Sam an almost helpless salesman, when he comes up against Ivan-with-a-blueprint-that-works.

Look, the drink Ivan offers may be crawlin' and stinkin'—but maybe Sam has no business trying to stop Ivan's ministrations? Does Sam have *any* alternative to offer? Anything other than a mystical hope in a thing called Democracy, which he can't define and can't tell how to achieve?

What Ivan is offering is a good, sound, helpful thing; Ivan knows it, because it helped him. Ivan's not a hypocrite; he believes deeply and sincerely in Communism, because Communism has worked for him, in his own direct experience.

Trouble is, Ivan has only a witch-doctor's ritual-taboo pragmatic method, and doesn't understand what it is, exactly, he has a blueprint for. It's a blueprint for going from a feudal culture to industrialism—and Ivan doesn't understand its limitations.

Quinine won't cure dropsy, and digitalis won't cure malaria. The witch doctor has to be able to recognize the disease, as well as know a cure.

Communism is—whether we like to realize it or not—the best ***known*** method of going from feudalism to industrialism. But it's absolutely inapplicable to the problems in Africa; Africa has never reached the feudal level—the natives there are still, basically, at the preceding ritual-taboo stage. It won't work for South America; the situation there is too confused between ritual-taboo, feudalism, and already-working industrialism. It isn't applicable to the United States, or the other Western nations; they have their socio-political problems, but they have long since passed from feudalism to industrialism, so the Marx-Lenin-Stalin map is useless to them.

But Communism is applicable to any feudal culture that needs to become an industrial system. This happens to apply to most of the Asian peoples—which means most of the people of the Earth.

We're losing the political front, however well we do on the military front, because we deserve to.

We have nothing to offer; the witch doctors have an easy victory when the scientist has nothing whatever to offer. And social scientists have neither explained our own development, nor found what, in Communism's effective work, is actually necessary to its highly desirable result.

Not all that witch's brew called Communism is necessary—but don't be stupid enough to try to tell a Russian, ex-serf, now citizen of one of the two greatest nations of Earth, that there is nothing fine, good, and of great value to Mankind in Communism.

THE EDITOR

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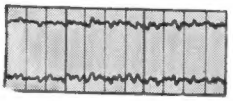
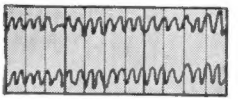
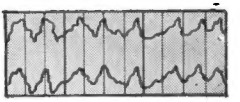


Brain in concentrated thought: Waves are short, irregular and frequent.



Brain in relaxation: Waves are tall, neat, uniform in size and shape.



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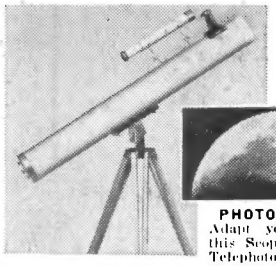

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